「著作権保護コンテンツ」
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まぜこぜ修繕屋
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角川スニーカー文庫
「著作権保護コンテンツ」

Doors Vol.1

The Mixed Up Repairman

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Door 1:

The Mixed up Repairman

She saw a door on the ceiling of her own room.
Lying face-up on her bed, Mine quietly fell into confusion.
Was this a prank? Had Takumi crept in while she slept and quietly remodeled the place?
She had considered various possibilities, but none of them seemed likely.
For the time being, she decided to take a look around.
The ceiling was covered wall-to-wall with doors. From them, a fluorescent light she recognized hung down.
So this was still, unmistakably, Mine's room — or so it seemed.
By the window were white curtains and a golden kitten figurine, placed there because it was said to be good feng shui.
A desk, a chair, a closet. Her school uniform hung from the wall hook.
But the walls — and the posters where male idols should have been smiling — now had doors of all sizes stuck to them.
She tried getting up.
Of course that didn't make the room go back to normal.
So she tried lying back down again.
When the result turned out to be the same, Mine sat up.
In situations like this — right, that thing. She'd learned it in the school's disaster-preparedness drill. First, stay calm. Calm down, self. Calm down, humanity. She would not yield to the temptation to open and close and open and close every last door that had no business being there.
She would not yield. Period.
Tearing her hand away from the doorknob she'd grabbed, Sonezaki Mine began changing into her school uniform.
All the while thinking: if only today had been a day off, she could have opened and closed them all she wanted.

"Chisa-Chisa-Chisa-Chisa-Chisa-Chisa!"
Shouting her little sister's name repeatedly, she flew down the stairs in one great dadadadadada rush.

The staircase, too — both walls to the left and right — had doors of various sizes, the sort that made you wonder what on earth could possibly pass through them. But the basic policy of not reacting to every single one had been unanimously passed by the House of Representatives inside Mine's heart.
"Chisa!"
She flew down the last step and burst into the cramped room with its little table and TV.
It was a little too shabby to really call a dining room, but that's what the sisters called it.
Light poured in from the window.
As for the countless doors scattered here and there — no comment, of course.
On the table, toast for two along with a simple vegetable salad and cups of something to drink had been prepared.
Well, today's breakfast duty fell to her little sister Chisa, so that was fine.
The seat where her sister usually sat was empty. Instead, on top of the table, a squirrel about fifteen centimeters tall with five tails was stuffing its cheeks with toast spread with marmalade jam.
When the squirrel saw Mine, it went,
"Gyugge."
And cried out.
"Uwaaah."
If Mine had not been a girl of a certain age. She would have wanted to spray snot. Right here, right now, with all her might.
The problem was figuring out where to assign the greater number of surprise points: to the fact that she could somehow understand what the squirrel was saying, or to the apparent fact that this was her little sister.
"No no no, wait, let me just wait a moment—"
Muttering to herself as she approached the table, Mine recovered just the tiniest bit of composure.
To begin with — was this squirrel really her little sister? Shouldn't she confirm that first?
When you think of something, act on it!
"Tei."
Mine delivered a single chop toward the squirrel on the table!
The squirrel's eyes flashed! It instantly crossed both paws and caught Mine's hand-blade firmly!
"That stance...it's definitely Chisa!"
"Gugaryagugeggy!"
Mine slowly withdrew her blade and said,
"I'm not sure where to begin or what to say, and I have the feeling that no matter where I start it won't make any difference, so I'll just come right out with it.
You look like a five-tailed squirrel that goes gugya-gugya when it talks."
"____"
At her sister's words, Chisa replied sulkily,
"Gugi, gugya-gege?"
"No, it's not a fight, it's exactly what I said."
Her sister let out a sigh of exasperation, and said,

"Gugya-gu-gege-gi-gugya. Gugyu-gigi-gugyu-ge. Gi-gigya-ge-ge-ge."
.....
"Ehh……?"
Not understanding a word of what had been said, Mine groaned and squinted her brows.
Field guide? So there was some creature resembling a squirrel called a "little sister" in a field guide?
Or perhaps, the moment you were born as someone's little sister, you ended up looking like this?
But would something like that really be put in a field guide?
She searched her memory. Whether her little sister had been something resembling a squirrel.
Or whether there might be some unreliable-narrator twist involved, some punchline like "actually you're a squirrel too."
The answer came immediately. Of course not.
She looked and could dimly see her own reflection in the window glass. A human girl with black hair down to her shoulders, wearing a blazer uniform. The knot in her tie was a bit careless, but in a situation like this, she wanted to praise herself to the ends of her family line just for having tied the tie at all.
And in her memory, her sister's appearance up until yesterday was that of a perfectly ordinary, energetic girl.
About the same height as Mine, naturally light-chestnut-colored short hair — her middle school teacher had once complained that she must be dyeing it.
At a complete loss for what to say or how to say it, Mine fell silent.
Chisa, for her part, turned on the TV in irritation with the remote.

At that instant.
From the screen, with a slurp! — mucus of various colors shot out!
"Wohyaaah!?"
Mine reflexively recoiled. Chisa was startled by her reaction.
The mucus swirled and tangled together and formed into the smiling face of a weather lady.
A strip of paper stuck to the side of the TV — like a talisman against evil spirits — shook and shook,
『……Today will be an unseasonably hot day. It may be a symptom of the global warming brought on by the foolish transgressions of arrogant humanity. But do not forget. This is merely the beginning.』
And played back the lady's voice.
Suddenly Mine realized something.
— No.
Or perhaps she had already realized it long ago, and had only been pretending not to.
Because it was a very frightening thought.
"Hey, Chisa."
"Gyu?"
"Maybe I'm wrong, but…I think I might have gone crazy."

On the TV, the weather lady was still smiling pleasantly and railing against humanity's foolishness——

Mine stopped halfway up the hill.
One side of the road opened up and from there the whole town could be seen at a glance.
『……In order to make this twenty-first century Japan into something better……!』
Somewhere, a crackled, hoarse voice blared from a loudspeaker. There was an election coming up soon, if she remembered right.
"Well…even if you say 'this Japan'…"
Without really meaning to, Mine retorted aloud to no one in particular.
Just beside her, a large truck trundled past, its countless legs squirming.
The traffic light ahead changed from red to green. As the wriggling red tentacles retracted, the blue insects that had been swarming the area scattered and crowded back. Cars and motorcycles moved their legs and tails, clattering and wriggling forward.
When she'd first seen it this morning she hadn't known what to do, but she was surprisingly starting to get used to it.
"Gugya-ri? Ge."
Mine had gone still, staring into the distance. Chisa, perched on her shoulder, made a worried-sounding call.
"Gi-gyari-gyoru-gi, gyagugigyu-ge-ge-guge-ge-ge."
"Mm. I'm fine. It wouldn't have changed anything to stay home."
She gave an answer that she herself couldn't tell was positive thinking or resignation.
Various things had happened, but today she had gone to school anyway.
About a tenth of the students, and the Japanese language teacher, were five-tailed squirrels — probably someone's little sisters, she imagined.
She had worried that strange foreign languages or weird new subjects might have been added, but the actual content of the classes was, each of them, fairly normal, which was unexpected.
……The classrooms had all turned into these oddly long, narrow counter-style seats, and depending on where you sat you couldn't read the blackboard, which was inconvenient. And sliding handouts along the counter top to pass them around wasn't what she'd call elegant. Nor was having the teacher say "from the person over there."
In any case, it had not been meaningless to go outside today. Thanks to that, Mine had noticed something.
Setting her feet in motion again, on the way home, she said,
"By the way, Chisa—"
She called out to the sister on her shoulder.
Crossing the street into the residential area. A policeman with a face painted green and black was crawling along the edge of the sidewalk — a sight that was a little frightening, but since Chisa showed no reaction to it, this was probably an ordinary sight for everyone else too.
Walk a little further and home comes into view.
"Why is only our house covered in doors?"
Right.

The house visible ahead — not just the fence, ceiling, and walls, but even the garden ground itself — had doors of all sizes stuck all over it.
But the other houses on the street, and the school, had only as many doors as they needed.
For some reason, only the house where the two of them lived had become door-covered. This couldn't be anything but strange. ...Or so she felt. But—
Chisa fell silent for just a moment, then replied,
"Gyu-ge, ge-gege."
"Oh, is that so. Normal, huh."
.....Well, she hadn't expected a satisfying answer. But all the same.
Mine had been thinking about it all morning.
Was it she who had gone strange — or was it the world?
At first she thought it was herself. The reason everything looked full of doors, the reason her sister looked like a squirrel — wasn't it because her own head had tuned in to some frequency it could receive with terrifying clarity?
But after going outside and seeing and hearing various things. Now she was starting to think it might be the world that had gone strange.
"But, you say 'normal,' except our house being jam-packed with doors while others aren't is still a contradiction, isn't it? Don't you think that's strange?"
This also seemed like proof that the world had gone wrong somehow.
Chisa shrugged slightly and said,
"Gigya-gya, g-gyu-gigya."
"Oh, is that so. Society, huh."
When it was put that way, she didn't know how to respond.
Before long, the two had arrived in front of the house.
Though calling it "home" didn't quite feel real. Because it wasn't the place she had grown up.
Due to work, her father and mother had gone abroad for a while. And there had been various complications involving the rental apartment where they'd been living — lease periods and so on.
One thing and another, the two sisters had recently moved to this house left behind by an uncle they'd never even met.
And now the whole house was covered in doors. Not exactly a comfortable environment.
Sighing inwardly, she passed through the aluminum gate, and Mine pulled a jangling ring of keys from her pocket.
Big keys and small keys of various shapes, and attached to them — a panda, a skeleton, a samurai, a hammer — all sorts of key chains seemingly at random.
Up until yesterday, all the key chains had been cat characters in different poses and colors. Or so she seemed to remember.
The front door should have the fallen-warrior key chain on it. She remembered because she'd hesitated over it this morning when leaving.
Being careful not to mix it up with the Genji-side fallen-warrior key chain, she selected the key, inserted it, turned it — a small click and resistance. She pushed the door open——
.....After so many strange things in a row since morning, Mine was honestly exhausted. She had grown numb to the weirdness.

So.
"Hey. Welcome home."
When there was a stranger with a staff standing inside the front entryway — she only thought: now what?
He looked to be in his mid-twenties. Spiky blond hair, a long black leather coat.
The man's smile was perfectly natural, and his manner equally so. The way he twirled the staff in his hand — even that seemed natural.
The staff's silvery-gray color. Its length, about a meter and a half. It resembled a metal pipe, but various parts of it were shaped like tools of some kind.
That staff.
Ko-ko-kon.
Like so.
Before the sisters could come to their senses, it had struck Chisa — who was perched on Mine's shoulder — on the head, three times.
"Ow!?"
More startled than hurt, Chisa hurriedly jumped back onto the top of the shoe cabinet.
"What are you doing all of a sudden!?"
Mine raised her voice in protest — while flinging her bag at the man's face on the "what" to block his vision, aiming a front kick at his stomach on "are you doing," then a chop to the back of his bent-forward neck on "all of." By the time she finished with "a sudden," the man was face-down on the floor.
"Exactly right, exactly! Hitting someone on the head out of nowhere! What do you think you're doing!? Pervert! I'm calling the police!"
Chisa, too, from the top of the shoe cabinet, jabbed a finger at the fallen man's back and hurled insults——
Then the sisters both froze at the same instant.

They exchanged glances, nervously.
Just now——
Chisa——
Had spoken Japanese.
The two of them stared at each other with question-filled eyes, the gazes crossing meaninglessly.
Well. Of course. For Mine, it was perfectly natural for her little sister to speak Japanese.
But that was true up until yesterday.
Today — from the very beginning, until just a moment ago — Chisa had only been saying gugya-gugya.
And yet.
"……Chisa, you're speaking proper Japanese now, right……? Different from before……"
Mine murmured in a daze. Chisa, too, frowned and said,
"Yeah. But. Up until a moment ago I was only saying gugya-gugya. But—"
She cut her words off briefly, then said,
"The strangest thing was that I didn't find it strange at all."

Without anyone leading, both gazes shifted to the man lying face-down. The silver-haired stranger.
The moment this man struck Chisa's head three times, Chisa's words changed — no, returned. Then surely there was some connection……
"Hm? Silver hair? But wasn't it blond just a moment ago?"
"……U-u-u-u-u……"
At Mine's murmur, the man stirred and raised himself up — not even checking a mirror, he said,
"Ah…so it turned silver……"
As though it were obvious.
"'Turned,' you say. And you accept it. What does that mean, exactly?"
At Chisa's question, the man propped himself up, one hand pressing the back of his head,
"……Hmm……but explaining this to you, I doubt you'd believe me anyway……"
"I'll believe you!"
Mine leaned forward and said,
"Since this morning, all sorts of things have been wrong, and Chisa — my little sister — was a squirrel, and nothing is the way I know normal to be, but everyone else seems to think it's all perfectly ordinary!
At first I was a little frightened, wondering if maybe I was the one who'd gone strange, but I've been starting to think that actually it's the rest of the world — everything other than me — that's gone strange!
And then you showed up, and Chisa started speaking normally again——
So! If you know something, please tell me! No matter how outlandish the story, I'll believe it!"
Mine fixed a serious gaze on him. The man looked troubled and said,
"Wow. You actually remember what things were supposed to be like."
"Mine! Sonezaki Mine!
'What things were supposed to be like' — that means everything really has gone wrong, doesn't it!——And, er, your name——"
"Ah. I'm Shirin. And—"
The man who gave his name as Shirin held out his long staff and gave it a little shake,
"—this is a Wrench."
She thought there might be a tool called that, but of course Mine didn't care at all about the name of the staff.
"So — what has happened to everything?"
"……Honestly, I think even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it……"
"I'll believe it!"
Under Mine's stare, the man — Shirin — let out a sigh, and then said,
"To put it simply.
There are many different worlds out there that resemble each other but differ in small ways. Those worlds have become all mixed up together in a strange fashion, which has thrown what's 'normal' in each of them out of order.
So I've been going around fixing things, and the way to do that was to strike your sister — Chisa-chan's — head three times with this Wrench.

Which made the world just a tiny bit better, and brought Chisa-chan's speech back to what it should be.
Do you believe me?"
—The sound of a truck passing outside.
Mine, still in her charged pose, said,
"That is impossible!"
"Yeah. I figured you'd say that."
Shirin smiled wryly, turned on his heel, and heading down the hallway said,
"Well, I think things will gradually fix themselves bit by bit. Just wait patiently."
Still facing away, he gave a casual wave, and that hand reached for the knob of a nearby door.
The door, which had no business being there, opened with a clunk, Shirin stepped inside, it shut with a thud——
And that was that.
"Wait! Hold on!"
Snapping back to herself, Chisa ran down the hall and grabbed that doorknob, but a door that had no business existing in the first place wasn't about to open.
Left in the dim entryway and hallway were only Mine and Chisa——

They got home and clunked the front door shut.
"I can't take this!"
Mine suddenly cried out.
Chisa, on her shoulder, jumped in surprise and hopped to the top of the shoe cabinet.
"What is it, Sis, all of a sudden!?"
Asked, Mine set her bag carefully down on the step up from the entrance, then said,
"You know — the other day, that person named Shirin came and fixed Chisa's words and then vanished through a door — you remember that, right?"
"Of course I remember."
"Chisa's words did go back to normal, but the school was all wrong."
The classroom she'd gone to the other day had become strangely elongated and narrow.
When she came in today, that was gone.
But in its place, the chairs and desks were a little over five meters tall.
Everyone, as though it were perfectly ordinary, had brought their own personal ladder and was climbing up and down with them.
Wondering if this was what she'd heard called a "sky arena" in shounen manga, she attended class.
It was a fresh experience, if nothing else.
"At Mine's words, Chisa tilted her head slightly and said,
"It was normal though?"
"Oh, was it? Was that normal too?"
Mine forced a strained smile.
"It seems Chisa hadn't noticed, but actually all sorts of things were changing in all sorts of ways. And, you know — Shirin, from the other day, said something like 'I think things will gradually improve, just wait patiently'—"

"He did say that."
"But it's not getting better!"
Mine raised her voice.
Between yesterday and today, there had been changes big and small. The most memorable one was the classroom.
But could that be called "better"? No, it could not.
If things were going to happen like this, then, say, the walls could turn transparent while she was in the bath, and there was no saying they wouldn't.
"I have no idea what will change, when, or how — I can't just patiently wait for that!"
At Mine's cry, Chisa made a troubled face and said,
"There's nothing you can do about that, though.
Even if you wanted to lodge a complaint, there's no way to even meet that strange person from the other day."
"Mmrrgh....."
Called out, Mine was at a loss for words.
That was true — there was no way to contact someone who had disappeared through the inside of a door that had no business being there.
"Ahh, I wish there were something that could be done. Like, opening one of the random doors around here—"
Saying so, she opened one of the meaningless doors on the wall and stuck a hand in.
"—grabbing something, and pulling it out like this—"

Something came out.

"How!? Just what exactly did you do!?"
Yanked without warning from some other world into this one.
Teary-eyed and confused, Shirin waved his Wrench around while lecturing the two sisters, who were seated seiza on the step in the entryway.
At his fury, Mine bowed her head deeply,
"I'm sorry. Something like intuition, or a woman's instinct — that sort of thing."
"What kind of super-science is that!?"
Shirin's voice went even higher. Apparently that explanation didn't satisfy him.
But since Mine, who had done it, had absolutely no idea how it worked either, there was nothing else she could say.
Anyway, Mine raised her head and said,
"Ah. Never mind that, there's actually something I wanted to talk to you about."
"'Never mind that.' You brushed past that awfully smoothly, Mine-chan."
Apparently recognizing further inquiry as pointless, there was a resigned note in Shirin's voice.
Of course Mine paid it no mind, and said,
"Shirin-san, you said the mixed-up world would someday return to normal — but it's not getting better, and there was a place that had gone wrong again!"
Eyebrows raised in protest — but Shirin was not the least bit moved, and said,

"Ahh. It's not like everything goes back to the way it was all at once the way Chisa-chan's words did.
Even if something seems to have gone wrong, it's more like a necessary intermediate stage on the way back to normal. So don't worry about it."
"I'm worried!"
Mine jumped up and pressed him, but Shirin maintained a perfectly unconcerned face,
"I can't help that. Even I don't know, for each world I fix, what in this world will change in what way."
"But for us too — not knowing what might change, when, or how — to live without worry or concern——"
"Hold on a moment."
The one who interrupted Mine was Chisa, who had been sitting silently up until now.
She stood up abruptly, looked straight up at Shirin's face, and said,
"You just said 'whichever world I fix,' not 'whichever world gets fixed.' Which means — am I right that you, alone, are going around fixing all these different worlds?"
"To be precise, it would be me and the Wrench, but.....well, yes, that's right."
At the answer, Chisa nodded with satisfaction, then looked up at Mine and said,
"So — that's apparently how it is, Sis."
".....What do you mean?"
Asked back, unable to follow, Chisa stamped her foot impatiently, tap-tap-tap, and said,
"So what I mean is. It seems like even he doesn't know what will change in what way—"
"Hey, 'even he'?" Chisa completely ignored Shirin's murmur and continued,
"—but what will change and when has now become clear, hasn't it. Which means: the moment this guy fixes some world somewhere."
"Ah. I see."
At that, Mine let out a breath of understanding.
If Shirin were the only one going around fixing worlds, it naturally followed.
She accepted it for a moment — but then.
"Okay, so that's established — but it doesn't mean we can live calm and settled lives."
"I might add—"
Shirin interjected from the side.
"—I can't give you a schedule of when the world changes. The time it takes to fix each world depends on the conditions of that particular world."
".....Hmm....."
Mine crossed her arms and groaned.
In the end, all that had become clear was that they couldn't know what would change or when.
In that case——
"——Oh, I see."
Mine raised her face, fixed her eyes on Shirin, and said,
"I should just help. Help fix the worlds."
Shirin went rigid for a moment.
Then, slowly. Ve-e-e-ry slowly, he made a face like he'd stepped in something, and said,
"What kind of logic is that?"

"Erm. I'm in agreement that returning the world to normal is a good thing. But in order to do that, I have to accept that all sorts of things will keep changing in the meantime.
If I just sit and wait doing nothing, and suddenly all sorts of things change, I get confused and troubled.
But if I'm on the side that's fixing the world, then even when the world changes because of that, I can make my peace with it.
You know how people who get carsick don't get sick when they're driving themselves? The logic is the same as that."
"No, I don't think it's the same logic at all……so you mean, are you seriously suggesting coming with me to various worlds?"
Asked, Mine looked straight back into Shirin's eyes and——nodded.
"I believe that's what it amounts to."
"Sis!"
At her sister's voice, Mine still didn't turn around,
"Chisa, even if you try to stop me——"
"That's an excellent idea!"
"Stop——……."
She swallowed her words and looked, and met her sister's eyes — eyes sparkling madly.
"Excellent?"
"Getting to go to all sorts of strange worlds sounds fun, doesn't it!"
"Look. Chisa. This isn't a game."
"I know, Sis. Of course I'll help in any way I can, but—"
"It's another world. It might be dangerous."
"Then I can't let you go either."
"No, I'll be fine."
"Why!? Aha. I see — Sis, you're planning to go to all these different worlds by yourself and have all the fun, aren't you."
"I'm not thinking anything like that!"
While the sisters argued.
Sensing this was about to become something troublesome, Shirin quietly, stealthily began to back away——
And seizing the moment, he slid himself into a nearby door and closed it!
Bang! At the sound of the door shutting, Chisa finally noticed.
"Ah! He ran away!"
She jumped frantically for the doorknob, but it didn't budge at all now.
But at that moment! Mine's eyes flashed!
She dashed into the living room. Target: a door on the floor that had no business being there!
"It's this one!"
She opened the door with her left hand and simultaneously thrust in her right hand, grabbed something, and yanked it out.

Shirin really came out.

"How!?"
Teary-eyed, slapping his knees as he shouted in the hallway — this time Mine kept a perfectly cool expression,
"Never mind that. About helping——"
"You said 'never mind that' again!?"
Shirin got even more worked up. Mine scowled and said,
"Because. I just had a feeling he was somewhere around there, and when I tried it, it worked — that's the whole story. I can't explain it any further than that."
"'A feeling'!? That's super-science again!?"
Shirin kept ranting, until Mine finally raised her voice too,
"Oh, honestly! To begin with, it's Shirin-san who's in the wrong here, for ignoring what I was saying and running away! If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have had to cause any supernatural phenomena!"
"What kind of logic is that!?"
"If you're going to say it's wrong for us to come along and help — then explain clearly why it's wrong! Don't just run away in silence!"
"……Ugh……mmm……"
Shirin was cornered and fell silent.
"Stop being stingy and just take us along."
From Mine's shoulder, Chisa glanced at him,
"The other worlds aren't that dangerous, are they? You go back and forth to them in that light outfit."
"……I-i-i-n-n no, Chisa-chan, it may look like a light outfit, but this coat alone can withstand ten thousand degrees of heat——"
"We have a gas burner in the kitchen. Want to try it?"
"Sorry. I just lied."
Instant, total capitulation.
"To begin with — is there anything about taking us along that would actually be harmful to you, Shirin-san?"
Asked by Mine, Shirin immediately replied,
"Chaperoning sounds like a hassle."
The sisters' expressions didn't even flicker — they simply let their bloodlust expand.
"Anything else?"
Shirin, perspiring now, said,
"……A-……well, but, the thing is, going to other worlds isn't going to be fun. It really isn't. For one thing, money will be different, so you won't be able to buy food or souvenirs or anything."
"That doesn't matter to us."
"Just sightseeing sounds fun enough."
Refuted instantly. Shirin bowed his head with a troubled look and muttered something to himself,
"……u-……hmm……take……taking them……
Useful……would they be……?

Well, now that I think about it, Mine-chan did say she remembered what things were supposed to be like, and she did locate me on the first try……rather than chalk that up to coincidence, it might be more reasonable to think there's some meaning behind it……"
It seemed less like thinking and more like talking himself into it.
They stood watching in silence for a while, and at last Shirin looked up sharply and said,
"You must follow my instructions without fail. If you can promise that, I'll accept your offer."
At the declaration, the sisters looked at each other and nodded.
『Thank you very much.』
They bowed in unison.
That was the beginning of the two of them — their journey, both near and far.

Two bottles of water in the pouch at her waist, ready to go.
Handkerchief, check. Tissues, check. Ate lunch a little early.
Shoes packed in a vinyl bag for when they went outside over there.
An inexpensive shirt and slacks for ease of movement. Hair tied back.
"Ready for anything!"
"Ready for anything, Sis?"
Her sister on her shoulder gave a weary look.
Sunday, ten minutes before one in the afternoon. Just a little before the agreed time.
The sense of excitement before going out — something she hadn't felt since an elementary school field trip.
With Chisa loaded on her shoulder and in full gear, she paced back and forth across the tiny dining room, this way, that way.
The clock was moving unbearably slowly.
"Sis. I'm telling you, calm down."
And yet Chisa, too, was tapping one foot impatiently.
The minute hand edged toward twelve, not quite there yet.
A wall door that had no business being there opened with a clunk.
"Welcome――"
『You're late!』
Sisters together in unison, and Shirin, who had peeked his face in, flinched back.
"……Wait, it's not time yet, is it?"
In the same outfit as before — black coat, Wrench in his right hand. Black socks……fine, but he didn't appear to be carrying any shoes.
Mine sighed as Shirin stepped out, and said,
"When meeting somewhere, it's better to arrive a little early.
Because there are times when you've forgotten something and need to run back for it.
Like, say, when you might go outside but haven't brought your shoes."
At this observation, Shirin blinked in surprise for just a moment — then grinned slyly,
"You mean just like me right now, you'd say?"
He closed the door he'd come through with a thud, then lifted his left foot jauntily.
He gave the area around his calf a pat with his free left hand — and with that,

Something shluuurped out from beneath his trouser cuff and covered his foot, forming itself into a black boot.
『Ooooooooooh.』
Mine and Chisa's voices came out involuntarily.
"There you go."
Shirin gave one wink, another pat made the shoe vanish again.
『Oh.』
Again the sisters' voices in unison.
"What is that, what is that!?"
"Science? The power of science?"
"More or less. My preparations are complete. Yours?"
『Ready!』
He nodded at the two of them in chorus, then swept the tip of the Wrench in a circle through the air.
"Well then, today....."
Led by the swaying tip of the Wrench, they headed into the kitchen.
An old, stainless-steel sink. A blackened range hood spinning ceaselessly. And amid all that, only the newly installed gas burner gleaming brightly.
This being an older house, the kitchen was by no means spacious or comfortable.
Suddenly the tip of the Wrench made a sharp little motion.
"Here, I think."
The Wrench pointed to a cabinet door under the sink.
"Here.....?"
Mine peered in from behind. She thought this door had been here all along.
"Yes. Here."
Shirin crouched down and opened the cabinet. Inside was a small square space, currently empty, with a drain pipe visible.
In its depths, one small door about thirty centimeters on each side.
"Even here!?"
Mine couldn't help crying out.
According to legend, if you see one of the tea-brown insects whose name starts with G, there are thirty of them somewhere. Was this like that?
Imagining attic spaces and beneath the tatami mats packed solid with doors was, frankly, a little bit unpleasant.
"Alright, everyone hold on to the Wrench or to me."
Whether he hadn't noticed or had simply ignored Mine's alarm, Shirin got down on all fours.
".....But, will we fit through there?"
A genuine question. The door's dimensions looked cramped even for Chisa, let alone Mine. It was hard to imagine Shirin fitting at all.
"We'll fit. It's a door."
Shirin answered breezily.
Of course it made no sense, but at this point worrying about common sense and normalcy felt utterly pointless.

Unable to do much else, Mine put in the effort to feel like she'd accepted it.
"Alright then, let's go.
I'll lead the way, so both of you, under no circumstances let go of me or the Wrench. All right?"
Chisa hopped down from her shoulder and clutched the Wrench tightly.
Mine crouched down on the spot and gripped the end of the Wrench in her right hand.
And the three of them——
In a posture that was not at all dignified, began shuffling forward.
As seen from Mine at the back, Shirin stuck his head into the open door — his shoulders, which should have been too wide for the door frame, nonetheless slipped smoothly through.
Matching his pace, Mine too moved forward, ducked her head through the door. No part of her body hit anything, and beyond the door was dark, nothing visible——
"Here we go."
Together with Shirin's small voice, there came the sound of a sliding door opening.
There was the light of midday.
"We've arrived!"
Shirin crawled out and declared,
"Eh?"
"……That easily?"
The sisters' voices were deflated.
Chisa hopped off the Wrench, Mine crawled out and stretched.
Mine looked around and said,
"But shouldn't something like this — travel between worlds — have more, like, glowing gates, and needlessly solemn BGM, and CG-style light effects……can't we have something like that?"
"No."
"Oh. We can't."
Part of why she was so unsatisfied was that the journey between worlds had been so terribly anticlimactic, but more than that, it was because this place felt somehow familiar.
It was a six-tatami Japanese-style room.
To the left, sliding shoji panels stood open. Beyond them, a hallway and a Japanese garden.
Midday sunlight streaming in, reflected off the tatami surface.
Well — the posts and pillars, and even the wooden fence beyond the garden, were all slathered in a weirdly garish vermilion.
Mine looked around, and thought about why it seemed familiar to her——then it came to her.
"I thought it seemed familiar somewhere……this is like Japan in those old foreign movies, isn't it……"
"Yes! That's it! That's exactly it! It's kind of fake-looking."
As she spoke, Chisa hopped back up to Mine's shoulder.
If you asked a hundred people what they imagined another world to look like, you'd get all sorts of answers.
Was Mine the only one who thought pseudo-Japanese aesthetics should be off the table?
Shirin swung the Wrench in his right hand back and forth and said,
"This world doesn't seem like an especially dangerous place, but just to be safe, be careful how you act.

The procedure is this: I locate a certain individual and tap that person's head lightly three times with the Wrench."
"Again?"
Chisa's murmur was exactly what Mine felt, but Shirin ignored it entirely and said,
"That person is one I need to find. It looks like they're outside right now.
So — let's start the search."
With that declaration, without even waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel.
The sisters followed behind him, through the hallway, into their shoes, down into the garden, around the building, and toward the front entrance.
.....Since this was another world, it could have been a bit more other-worldly. Tentacles, or.....
Rather put out by how underwhelming the other world was turning out to be, Mine was, inwardly, a little disappointed.

"Wow. It really is a different world."
"Well, of course."
At the voice Chisa raised the moment they passed through the front gate, Shirin gave a small wry smile.
On the wood-grain-printed paved road, vehicles large and small moved this way and that.
The vehicles resembled automobiles, but their roofs were like tile rooftops. All of them were done in garish lacquered vermilion and gold leaf, though if they'd been drab they would have looked like hearses.
The buildings, to the touch, felt like something akin to concrete. Colors: vermilion, black, gold, green. Depending on the angle of the light, they were fairly hard on the eyes.
Mine secretly decided in her heart to name this place the Nikko Tosho-gu World.
The clothes of the people passing by were — somehow like fake-traditional Japanese, or something along those lines. There were skirts, but no trousers; instead, hakama in various colors.
Perhaps for that reason, Shirin and Mine in their trousers drew some glances from passersby — complicated looks in their direction.
"This is a pretty strange world, isn't it, Sis?"
"Uh.....mm....."
Asked for agreement in her ear by Chisa, Mine answered vaguely.
It was certainly strange.
But somehow Mine found it easier on her than where she'd come from.
Maybe it was because she was predisposed to think: this is another world, so naturally all sorts of things are strange.
Though, since this world had supposedly also been mixed up, presumably it wasn't really supposed to be like this either.
Looking around and chatting about various things, Mine and the others passed through the residential area and into a busy commercial district.
More foot traffic now, with all kinds of shops side by side. On the sidewalk, a street musician wearing a great-wave-print tank top was hollering terrible rock music to the accompaniment of a biwa.

If only someone here had a Japanese sword, the fake-Japan image would be complete.
Distracted by the scenery, Mine's pace slowed without her noticing, and Chisa on her shoulder was watching everything around them with eyes full of curiosity.
Along the way, Mine spotted a yellow-ochre casual bag displayed in a store window — she rather wanted it.
"Ah. Just to make sure."
Shirin, walking ahead, didn't look back,
"No sightseeing. If you slow me down, I won't hesitate to leave you behind."
『……』
The sisters groaned.
"W-we're not thinking anything like that!"
Mine quickened her pace.
"A bit of sightseeing can't hurt."
"After we've done what we came to do, if there's time to spare — maybe."
Shirin brushed aside Chisa's complaint.
Going along the rows of shops, they came to a bridge spanning a large river.
There, Shirin stopped dead.
"Found them."
At his murmur, the sisters followed his gaze.
There — two young women.
Both looked to be in their mid-teens. One in a white blouse and scarlet hakama — she looked a little older. The other in denim furisode down to the waist with denim hakama.
They had stopped in front of a boutique — or rather, a clothes shop was more fitting — along the main street, leaned together shoulder to shoulder, peering into the shop window, deep in conversation.
Shirin approached the two naturally, Mine and Chisa following behind.
The scarlet-hakama girl and the furisode girl were absorbed in their window shopping and conversation.
Shirin gave the Wrench a single fluid twirl. In the same motion, he swung it down toward the furisode girl's head from behind——
——Ah!
At that moment Mine realized it!
——This is bad! The shop window!
But before she could say so aloud.
Kon — the tip of the Wrench struck the furisode girl's head once. Before the second could fall——
"Aki!"
The scarlet-hakama girl beside her yanked the furisode girl sideways!
The Wrench's second strike cut through empty air!
"——Dammit——!"
Shirin hissed a small curse, but it was too late.
Their reflections had been visible in the shop window and the two of them had seen everything.
Though he'd at least managed to strike the head once——

"What do you think you're doing!?"
The two turned to face them, and the scarlet-hakama girl shielded the one called Aki while throwing the question at them.
Naturally, in those eyes — as well as the eyes of the onlooking passersby around them — there was no shortage of suspicion and wariness, the look given to a potentially dangerous person.
Ah, so this is what it means to feel stares burning into you.
Mine had this slightly out-of-place thought.
Of course this was no situation for that kind of thinking.
"Ah. Well, actually——"
Shirin was about to say something casually, right hand going to scratch his head. But from the other side, that might have looked like raising the Wrench in his right hand.
"Run, Aki!"
"Y-yes!"
Before the words were out, the scarlet-hakama girl and the furisode girl had wheeled around and were sprinting!
"W-wait! Wait a moment!"
Shirin and Mine and Chisa rushed after them!
According to Shirin, he needed to tap the head three times. Which meant somehow two more times were needed.
"Wait! Please, listen to me!"
Mine called out as she ran — then mentally scolded herself for saying that, knowing no one ever stops when you say that. Knowing it in advance and still saying it when you end up chasing someone was, she discovered, yet another piece of life experience utterly useless to anyone.
And just as expected, the other side didn't stop.
"They're coming after us!"
The scarlet-hakama girl shot a glance over her shoulder at Mine and the others, and said to the furisode girl,
"Aki! It looks like they're after you specifically!"
"But why me!?"
"I'll try to hold them off! You get away first!"
"But!"
"Go!"
"……Alright!"
After that very shounen-manga exchange, the furisode girl kept running while the scarlet-hakama girl wheeled around and stood in their way!
Mine and Chisa came to a halt.
Shirin charged forward regardless, tried to run past the scarlet-hakama girl——
His black coat flew through the air.
An instant later, Shirin lay on the ground near Mine's feet, staring up at the sky.
His expression was dazed — he hadn't even registered being thrown.
Mine peered down at him from above,
"She's quite strong, so be careful!"
"……A little late for that……"

Muttering darkly, Shirin somehow pulled himself upright.
"……Well……what do we do now……"
"Can't be helped."
A voice from Mine's shoulder.
A black shadow flew across the air and landed in front of the scarlet-hakama girl! A fighting stance! A murmur of surprise went through the onlooking crowd!
Perhaps in this world, the sight of a fifteen-centimeter squirrel taking a fighting stance was unusual.
Facing the scarlet-hakama girl, Chisa declared boldly,
"I'll handle this. You two go after her."
"Ehh!?"
Shirin's voice raised in surprise.
"Then I'll leave it to you. Be careful."
Mine immediately replied and began running, curving around the scarlet-hakama girl.
Shirin reluctantly followed.
"You won't――"
The scarlet-hakama girl tried to block their path――
And her expression went rigid.
She had noticed. That she couldn't move.
Her body, her instincts, had understood it.
That moving carelessly would get her hurt.
Perhaps the scarlet-hakama girl was also noticing — that she was breaking out in a slight sweat.
She looked at it. At the one who had issued the warning to her instincts. The one who had stepped in front of her — a fifteen-centimeter squirrel.
Not a single opening.
The scarlet-hakama girl had no choice but to admit it. That this was an opponent she could not be certain of defeating even at full strength.
Mine and Shirin ran past at a slight distance, but the scarlet-hakama girl stood motionless, eyes fixed on the squirrel before her.
"Omezaki Hari."
Without any preamble, the scarlet-hakama girl gave her name.
It was her declaration that she recognized her opponent as a worthy rival and would give her full strength. How many of the bystanders understood that?
The squirrel across from her received that intention.
"Sonezaki Chisa."
With round eyes fixed on her opponent, Chisa gave her own name.
Did the onlookers notice?
That the space between the two was narrowing, millimeter by millimeter, like a crawling insect.
The moment of clash――was near.

Along the willowy riverside road, through the commercial district at a run.
The townspeople looked displeased at the chase through town, but no one tried to stop it.

The girl in denim furisode who went by Aki ran through the crowd. Mine and Shirin followed at a short distance.
Aki turned a corner. Mine and Shirin turned the same corner——
The two of them stopped.
Aki was there, around the corner.
Shoulders in their denim furisode rising and falling, she looked toward them and pointed.
And beside her.
"A fallen warrior!?"
"How rude! Who is a fallen warrior!"

The man standing alongside Aki replied indignantly to Mine's involuntary cry.
What he wore was armor that Mine recognized at a glance as warrior's plate. The armor from the waist down was black, from the stomach up, white.
On the white torso piece was a floral pattern and, in characters Mine could read: four characters reading "city constable."
At his waist, too, long and short Japanese swords.
If he'd had a helmet, he'd be a splendid armored warrior — but his head was bare, and moreover long-haired. This, inevitably, made one think of the fallen warrior figures from period dramas and ghost programs.
"City Constable, Sanmoto Gorou!"
The fallen warri——no, the man glared at Mine and Shirin, and declared his name in a loud voice,
"In the name of one entrusted with the peace of this ward by the authorities, I question you two! I hear that you struck this young lady on the head as you passed by, and then pursued her — what is your reason for this? Explain yourselves!"
"Ugh....."
Mine glanced at Shirin.
The person before them seemed to be the equivalent of a police officer.
Then they had no choice but to say something and smooth things over for now.
"Well, the truth is—"
Shirin gave the Wrench in his hand a twirl, and said,
"Right now, various worlds are all mixed together and strange, with the ordinary and the not-ordinary all jumbled up.
To fix that, I have to tap that girl's head three times with this Wrench——"
"You're both under arrest."
Killing intent appeared in the constable's eyes.
"Hold on, Shirin-san, did you really think he'd believe a story like that!?"
"No! Because normally, this is exactly the moment where someone thinks, 'If he were lying, he'd make up something more convincing' and believes you!"
"That's not happening!"
Even with Mine frantically admonishing Shirin, it was too late.
The constable drew the sword at his right hip——!
Mine and Shirin both recoiled, with a jolt——

But on closer look, it wasn't a sword at all, but a single staff.
That said, being struck by something like that would still clearly be very painful.
"Run!"
"Agreed!"
Mine and Shirin wheeled around and ran at full speed!
"You there! Don't run, you ruffians!"
Voice and footsteps from behind. And the clatter of armor, too.
They say everything in life is a learning experience, but would the experience of being chased by an armored warrior ever be useful for job hunting?
With some part of her mind thinking thoughts like that, Mine ran for all she was worth through the unfamiliar town.

The river flowed peacefully.
The grass on the embankment rippled in the wind and shimmered in the sunlight.
On that grass, two figures lay face up, gazing at the sky.
A fifteen-centimeter squirrel with five tails, and a young woman in scarlet hakama——Chisa and Hari.
With calm expressions, watching clouds drift by.
"Not bad,"
Chisa said, and,
"……Not as good as you. You're the first person to ever evade my Eagle-Claw Rampage Kick at that range.
I lost……but it was a good fight."
Hari said, looking at the sky.
Somehow, it seemed that after the fight, a friendship had been born.
"Hey."
Hari turned only her face toward Chisa,
"What you used to beat me——what was that technique called?"
"Shining Wizard."
"Hmm……"
Hari shifted her gaze back to the sky,
"Hey."
She spoke again.
"There must be……reasons, right?
My head got hot at the time, but……when that man tapped Aki's head, it didn't seem like he was trying to hurt her.
And.
I understand clearly from crossing fists with you — you're not a bad person."
"Mmm."
Chisa raised herself up halfway on the grass and looked at Hari,
"You wouldn't believe me if I told you?"
"I'll try to make an effort to believe."
"Hmm."

Honestly, Chisa herself hadn't been fully convinced by Shirin's explanation.
Whether she could tell it to someone else properly — she had zero confidence.
"There's a story that besides this world, there are many others that are similar but different."
Even saying it herself, it sounded suspicious — but Hari nodded,
"Many-worlds theory. I learned it in second-year middle school science."
"You learn that!?"
"Of course you do, normally. ……But if you're bringing that up……could it be, Chisa, you're about to say something like — you came from another world?"
"Something like that. I knew you wouldn't believe it."
Chisa shrugged. Hari said, a little reluctantly,
"Well, I can't say I believe it……but I have no choice but to believe.
Because normally……you know……squirrels don't talk, or use special techniques."
"Huh. Weird."
Chisa rose — yo — to her feet, cracking her shoulders and neck, and said,
"That man with the staff — his name is Shirin — he says something like all sorts of worlds like that have gotten all mixed together and gone strange.
And Shirin is going around fixing those worlds, but to do it, he has to tap somebody he finds on the head three times with that staff — or so he says.
Well. That sounds like rambling.
Or maybe conspiracy-theory stuff?
But actually, I had my own head tapped, and I realized that things I'd thought were normal up until then weren't normal at all.
So I basically have no choice but to believe it."
"He tapped your head three times……? You let him do it without evading?"
From Hari's perspective, knowing Chisa's skill, that was apparently more unbelievable than anything about worlds. She half-sat up abruptly.
Chisa's face stayed calm,
"Yeah. He had absolutely no hostility, and somehow I didn't feel like evading.
Anyway, after that, I couldn't help but accept it.
I didn't originally believe in other worlds or anything like that, but——"
Chisa looked around at their surroundings.
"The fact is, right now I'm here, and this place is too different from where I came from in all sorts of ways. I can only call it another world.
How to put it — this place feels like the Black Ships never came."
"The Black Ships did come, of course. I learned it in school too."
Hari smiled wryly,
"You know — the incident where Commodore Perry's Eastern Annihilation Black Ship Fleet came, and the warriors' cannons swept them all away, and it became the trigger for Japan's expansion into the world."
At this impossible history recounted so matter-of-factly, Chisa waved her hands,
"No. We don't have that history where I'm from.
Warriors' cannons. What kind of world-war-dominating fighting power is that?"

"We didn't actually dominate the world wars. Japan lost in the Fourth Super World War. Won the Fifth and Sixth by landslides though."
"——It sounds rough. This world."
Feeling a faint headache, Chisa pressed her temple, then said,
"Anyway, off topic.
The point is, all sorts of things each of us thinks are normal apparently aren't normal at all.
For example, it seems that right now, things we would ordinarily never do — we're doing them, thinking they're normal.
Of course we can't tell ourselves.
Doesn't that feel unsettling?"
At this, Hari's brow clouded,
"If that's true……I certainly can't feel at ease about it."
"That's why I'm going along with him. Because I want things to get back to their real normal, and feel at ease."
Keeping her true motive — half for the fun of it — hidden, Chisa looked straight into Hari's eyes,
"What about you? If you learned that this wasn't really normal — wouldn't you want to see what it's actually supposed to be like?"
Asked, Hari fell silent.
A wind blew, rippling through the green grass——

To Mine's eyes, it looked like a roadside teahouse from a period drama.
A thatched roof, and around it in various spots — stands and large sun-shade parasols that could only be for customers to rest at. A curtain swayed at the building's entrance. And to the side, there was a horse.
What was different: the matting on the stands, the parasols, the curtain, and the horse's trappings were all in black-and-white two-tone color.
The parasols had gold writing — something that looked like a pattern, or characters, she couldn't read.
Going by color alone, the whole area looked like a funeral.
But of course it wasn't. On the curtain hanging from the building, in characters Mine could read:
"Constable Station."
The entrance to the building had no door, and inside she could see the one they called Aki — in her denim furisode — and the armored constable.
The constable was saying something on what looked like a mobile phone, but was now talking with Aki.
"……This is bad."
Watching the scene from a little ways away, in the shadow of a building, Shirin murmured.
They'd somehow managed to shake off Constable Sanmoto for a while, but the constable had taken Aki inside the building.
"Bad, you say?"
Mine asked. Shirin, still watching the constable station, said,
"Yeah. That phone call……might mean he called for backup.
If that's the case, there's nothing the two of us can do.

Maybe we should come back another time....."
At the murmur, Mine felt an inward protest.
Spending all Sunday half a day and coming back with "it seemed impossible so we came home" was too undignified.
"But we only need to tap the head two more times, right?"
"Well yes, but.....it's difficult in this situation....."
Mine thought for a moment,
"Isn't there any other method? Other than Shirin-san striking the opponent's head with the Wrench three times?"
Asked, Shirin was quiet for a moment, then said,
"To be precise, rather than striking the head, the Wrench just needs to make direct contact with that girl three times.
I don't have to be holding it, and it doesn't have to be the head, but if there's clothing in between, it doesn't work.
Which means the method inevitably ends up something like what we've been doing."
"I see.....
Anyway, calling a retreat can wait until after their backup arrives — let's try everything we can until then!"
Mine said with force. Shirin smiled wryly but nodded.

"You're safe now. Backup will be here shortly. These ruffians will be rounded up in one sweep."
Meanwhile, inside the constable station.
The constable had finished his call on the portable communication device and said this — but the face of the furisode girl was still pale.
The silence dropped awkwardly, and the constable hurried to fill it with conversation.
"By the way, I don't believe I've had your name yet."
".....Aki. Omezaki Aki."
"Miss Omezaki. Were you perhaps the one who recently moved to Juuni-chome?"
"Yes. Um.....!"
"What is it?"
Aki hesitated for just a moment, then said,
"Those people — are they really lying.....?"
The constable paused for a moment, apparently not understanding, then said,
"Meaning.....?"
"The people who were chasing me.....they said it, didn't they.
That the world has become abnormal."
"They did say that."
The constable's tone conveyed it: those were nothing but delirious ramblings. But——
Aki, with her gaze cast slightly downward, said,
"You might think it's strange.....but honestly, lately, I sometimes find myself thinking.....is this really what normal is supposed to be like?"
At the rambling murmur, the constable nodded,

"I understand. There are many contradictions in this world. It happens often that what is natural and normal gets crushed by one circumstance or another."
"That's not quite what I mean.
Lately I have this feeling of unease, like — today should be a continuation of yesterday, but something is slightly off."
"I see. But life is something that, while it seems the same, is always changing little by little."
"No, that's not it either——"
Failing to make herself understood, frustrated, Aki searched for words and looked up——
"——Ah."
She looked toward the outside and exclaimed.
The constable also followed her gaze.
"Ah."
He too let out a small sound.
Outside, visible from the constable station. Lined-up houses, lined-up street trees.
Not too far from the station, among those street trees — one of them. Peeking out just a bit from the edge: silver hair, and a long staff.
"……Does he think that counts as hiding……you stay here."
The constable said, then crept slowly and quietly out of the station, heading that way.
Aki stood at the station entrance, watching the constable's back.
But Aki's heart was complicated.
The others had appeared in a strange get-up and suddenly started striking her head with a staff. They couldn't be normal people.
Which meant it was obviously better to have them apprehended, one way or another.
And yet.
Was it really alright for those people to be caught? That question, inexplicably, was churning in her chest.
It churned, but she couldn't explain those feelings — she didn't entirely understand them herself.
So in the end, she could only stand and watch.
The constable was almost at the street tree now, just a little further.
At that moment.
A shadow fell from above.
"Sorry!"
With the voice, kon — one light impact on her head.

Yes.
Mine cheered inwardly.
Shirin had made himself the decoy, holding a stick he'd found somewhere, drawing the constable's attention.
Mine, Wrench in hand, had climbed onto the roof, timed it right, leaped down, and struck the one called Aki on the head — konk — once!
Just one more time!
Aki must have been startled — she hurriedly retreated inside. Follow her and do it once more — konk — and that would be the end!

The constable seemed to have noticed their movements too, but Mine's speed would be faster than him turning back now!
About to rush into the station after Aki――
Mine sensed something strange and looked to the side.
There was the constable, who should have been way back by the tree!
"Fweh……!?"
She involuntarily cried out, leaping away from the station entrance.
"No way……!"
From where the constable had been to right in front of her. There was no way he could have moved that fast.
Was it a spirit? A paranormal event?
Given that the opponent's appearance was very fallen-warrior-esque, that was the first possibility Mine considered.
The constable, for his part, was the picture of composure,
"You thought you had the upper hand, ruffian! But you forgot about the Constable Station Field ― that was your undoing!"
"……Con-stable-sta-tion-fie-eld……?"
An explanation even more impossible than the paranormal, and Mine couldn't help frowning. The constable, for his part, puffed out his chest and said,
"Can it be you don't know? Within a certain space surrounding the station, a constable's abilities are multiplied severalfold!"
"What is this mysterious power zone!?"
Apparently realizing the plan had failed, Shirin emerged from the shadow of a tree and shouted.
"This isn't normal, you know. This isn't how it's supposed to be."
Mine couldn't help adding her own retort ― but the constable laughed through his nose,
"To call one's own ignorance 'not normal' reveals your shallowness, ruffian!"
He yanked out the sword ― the staff, really ― at his hip, leveled it at Mine――
"It really has gone wrong! It really has!"
The voice came from somewhere else.
『――』
Everyone reflexively looked.
There stood a woman in scarlet hakama! On her right shoulder ― one squirrel with five tails!
"Chisa!"
"Sister!"
Mine's and Aki's voices overlapped.
Neither Mine nor Aki understood why these two were here together.
But Chisa hopped down from Hari's shoulder to the ground, and pointed squarely at the constable,
"You probably won't believe me, but right now, this world has gone wrong in all sorts of ways! Clearly it would be better to return it to normal!"
"……Ugh……!"
At this, the constable's expression twisted.
Hari stepped forward,

"It appears this is not entirely made-up.
——Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. I am Hari, elder sister to Aki, whom you are currently protecting."
The constable, eyes still fixed on Chisa, said,
"T……certainly……if a five-tailed squirrel speaks, one must concede that something extraordinary is occurring……"
"At any rate, would you allow us to speak with Aki?"
Hari said, and began walking toward the station——
"You will not!"
But the constable thrust his staff out horizontally and stopped her.
"Let us say this world truly has gone wrong. Even so!
Who in the world would believe the raving that striking a citizen on the head with a stick fixes the world's abnormality!?"
"Wow. I can't argue with that."
Mine couldn't help murmuring.
Even Mine and Chisa — if they hadn't experienced Chisa's speech returning to normal — they wouldn't believe a story like that either.
"……Explaining it theoretically would take about three hours……"
Shirin muttered something vague, but of course the constable was having none of it.
"Whatever the case — whatever you call strange and normal — to me, the present society and this peace are what is normal!
Countless predecessors sweated and struggled, sometimes throwing their very bodies into the effort, and through extraordinary dedication, this is the peace that was won and called normal!
Protecting this precious normal is the duty of a constable!
And therefore!
I cannot accept the belated raving of those who tried to accomplish something by striking people first and explaining later, and release into danger a citizen I have taken under protection!"
This is bad.
Mine broke out in a cold sweat on her back.
By any measure, the constable was the one making sense.
She'd seen the occasional TV report about criminals who did bizarre things for incomprehensible reasons — and if viewed objectively, she was fairly certain, quite certain, that she and her companions were looking like the people in those reports.
Even so, she couldn't nod and say "you're right" and give up on returning the world to normal.
"Just one more time……somehow……!"
Her murmur was heard by everyone.
Of course, including the constable right beside her.
"If you won't give up, then arrest is the only option!"
Almost simultaneously with finishing the words.
The constable was right in front of Mine!
——How fast——!
By the time she was startled, Mine's right wrist — the one holding the Wrench — was already caught.

The only thing she had time to do was snap her wrist and fling the Wrench in Shirin's direction. It didn't even reach him; it clattered to the ground.
The very instant after she flung it, her right arm was wrenched behind her back, and she was slammed face-down on the ground.
"Ungh!?"
"Arrested!"
The constable's resonant voice above her back.
She'd seen the movement, but it was far beyond any speed she could react to.
Was this——the power of the Constable Station Field!?
Turned to the side, at the corner of her vision.
"Sis!"
Chisa cried, and simultaneously Shirin broke into a run. He crouched, grabbed the Wrench, and raised himself up——
The weight vanished from Mine's back.
Shirin stood up — and the constable was already beside him.
"Chisa!"
The moment Mine shouted, Shirin was sent flying, and the Wrench he held soared high into the air!
"Use the Wrench on that person!"
Reacting to Mine's voice, the fifteen-centimeter squirrel kicked off the ground and leaped into the air!
But the constable didn't miss that movement either!
"You won't!"
He bellowed and kicked off the ground toward the airborne Wrench!
Against Chisa's mobility — the constable, powers amplified severalfold! Who would reach it first——
"Got it!"
Chisa by just a hair! Also helped by the earlier start — by a paper-thin margin, she latched onto the Wrench in midair!
But that wasn't the end of it!
"Not yet!"
An instant behind, the constable's hand also caught the Wrench!
In a contest of strength, the constable had the advantage in weight and power. Chisa, refusing to yield, charged across the Wrench toward the constable's hand!
But——!
"I said you won't!"
The constable shouted and gave the Wrench he'd grabbed a great swing! Even Chisa couldn't run in thin air! Losing the Wrench — her footing — she was thrown into the air!
Leaping back sharply, the constable stood before the station in triumph.

In his hand — the Wrench.
"Kgh……!"
Landing at a distance, Chisa glared.

Mine could find no opening to raise herself.
Shirin finally managed to sit up.
Hari stood frozen, unsure what to do.
The constable, without dropping his guard, swept his gaze over everyone, then looked at the Wrench in his hand and said,
"It seems this staff is an important tool for you."
"Give it back!"
Shirin shouted. The constable gave him a glance,
"If I were the sort to return a weapon for striking people when asked, I'd have never become a constable!
Aki!"
"Y-yes!"
"Take this."
The constable called to the girl in the station, and threw the Wrench to her.
Aki caught it. The constable turned his back to her,
"Hold onto that. I'll take care of these people!"
He roared and kicked off the ground with all his might!
The group braced themselves — the constable bearing down on them——then pitched forward!
With a clatter he fell face-first on the ground, and after a moment the words he spoke were,
"Armor……heavy!"
『Now you notice!?』
Mine, Chisa, Shirin, Hari — and even Aki inside the station — all cried out at once.
"……Um……"
Watching the constable's fallen back, Aki, Wrench in one hand, said timidly,
"The Constable Station Field……? If your strength is multiplied severalfold too, the weight of the armor shouldn't bother you……"
The constable, struggling to sit up amid a clatter of armor, replied,
"Con-stable-sta……what's that?"
"……What do you mean 'what'……"
Aki was confused, murmured — and let her baffled gaze drift, then said,
"……Eh? Wait. Right. Something like a Constable Station Field doesn't exist, does it……"
"Obviously not."
The constable's firm declaration left everyone with question marks on their faces.
The strange power-up field that had existed just a moment ago seemed to have vanished even from the constable's memory——
"——Ah——!"
The one who cried out in realization was Mine. She half-raised herself and looked at Shirin,
"Of course! That person — Aki — received the Wrench!"
"Well, I mean — I could see that from the start, but……ah!"
Shirin also couldn't help raising his voice.
Right.
The Wrench that the constable had thrown — Aki had caught it with her bare hands.
Palm and Wrench.

That was the third direct contact.
The condition for fixing the world had been met.
The result — the strange part of the world had gone back just a little, and the thing called the Constable Station Field had disappeared too.
The slight recovery would have also affected Mine and the others' world.
"——Hyah!?"
The one who suddenly let out that cry was Chisa.
She kicked off the ground and leaped onto Mine's shoulder, burrowing her way in through the collar.
"Hey, wait……!? Chisa, what's wrong!?"
Mine stood up hurriedly and asked, and Chisa wriggled inside the clothes, then poked just her face up from the collar and said,
"M-M-Sis! I, I'm not — wearing — clothes!"
"……Ahh. Yeah……"
Apparently, the part where her sister wearing clothes was normal had been restored.
She was still a five-tailed squirrel, though.
Meanwhile.
"Green is absolutely not! Green is the one option that doesn't work!"
"……Right is normal. Why did I keep thinking it was left……"
Hari and Aki were both starting to mutter something.
Mine understood. The same thing that had happened to Chisa was happening to those two right now.
They had believed something abnormal was normal. And now they were confused.
"What in the world……?"
The constable too was confused, unable to keep up with what was happening around him.
And then.
"……So. Just now, the world went back just a little bit."
Shirin explained. The constable turned a hostile eye on him,
"Still spouting that nonsense——"
He started to move toward Shirin——
"It's alright!"
What stopped him was a voice from behind.
"'It's alright'……?"
The constable turned to find Aki, Wrench in hand, walking toward him.
She said to the constable,
"It's alright.
I……understood. Just now. That what these people were saying is true."
"……What?"
The constable looked troubled. Even though the strange field was gone, he apparently didn't even understand that something had just changed.
You'd think he'd at least find the armor strange. Mine thought this inwardly but of course said nothing aloud.
Aki continued to address the constable,

"I'm sorry to impose, but — would it be possible to pretend this incident never happened?"
"What——"
"Please!"
Aki bowed her head deeply.
"....."
What he read in her attitude — who knows.
The constable was silent for a while, but at last he raised the portable communicator to his ear,
"——Sanmoto here. My apologies — I'd like to withdraw the request for backup I made just now.
It appears this was a joke between friends, among children.
Yes. I'll be sure to give them a thorough scolding here before they go."
He said, and put the device away again.
"——Thank you very much!"
Aki bowed again. The constable replied, disconcerted,
"No thanks are necessary.
I am merely closing the case and preserving the normalcy and peace as I know them.
If you have come to a decision and say it is fine, then it is fine.
That is all.
That said.
As I said, I will give you a thorough scolding."
At his answer, Aki gave another small bow, then walked toward Shirin.
She held the Wrench out to him,
"Returning this to you. In exchange——
You will explain in detail what is going on, won't you?"
"Of course.
.....Though I don't have much confidence you'll believe the explanation."
Smiling ruefully, Shirin said this somewhat feebly.

The evening sun pouring through the window lit the empty kitchen.
The small cabinet under the sink was hanging open.
The sight of Mine and the others crawling out of it one by one was perhaps a little reminiscent of some horror movie.
But in any case.
Back in their own world, their own home.
Mine and Chisa — the two of them had returned.
"Ahh, we're back."
Stretching and raising her voice — though there was probably no reason to feel cramped —
Chisa had a strip of cotton hand-towel she'd received over there wrapped around herself.
"That constable's lecture was reeeally long."
"Well, just a lecture is getting off lightly — let's look at it that way."
Said Shirin, though there was just a hint of tiredness in his expression too.
After all that.
They had sat through the constable's lengthy lecture, then explained the whole story to Hari and Aki.

They apparently weren't entirely convinced, but they also chatted about various other things. By the time they returned, it was this hour.
"The world went back a little closer to how it should be — is that right?"
Crawled out from under the sink and standing up, Mine said, beating her trouser knees for no particular reason.
"It should have."
Shirin moved from the cramped kitchen toward the dining room and said,
"I can't tell you exactly what changed in what way in this world. But it has certainly moved in the direction of returning to normal.
——So — today you went to another world.
It would have become a major clash if one thing had gone differently, and you might have been arrested.
But even so, I think things turned out relatively well.
Taking that into account.
Are you done with this? Or do you still want to keep going around fixing worlds with me?"
"Of course I'm going."
Mine answered immediately while walking after Shirin.
"After today, I'm even more worried about leaving everything to Shirin-san on his own."
"Well now."
"I mean it."
She returned his smile with a smile of her own.
"We can only join you on weekends and holidays, I think."
"……You're in it for the long haul, I see……"
"My answer is the same."
Chisa answered the same as Mine.
"Well, all sorts of things happened, but basically it was interesting."
Saying that, she hopped up to Mine's shoulder and whispered in her ear,
"……But Sis, if you knew I was supposed to be wearing clothes all along, I wish you'd told me ahead of time."
A slightly resentful tone.
Mine smiled wryly,
"It's not——"
She was about to say "not a big deal, you're a squirrel after all," but somehow sensed that would make Chisa angry, so instead,
"I wasn't doing it on purpose, so give me a break. Chisa."
"……Hmph……"
When Chisa puffed out her cheeks, it looked exactly like a squirrel with food stuffed in its cheek pouches — which was cute in its own way.
"Anyway.
Suddenly finding yourself naked like today — that's something I'd really rather not repeat.
If you know what I'm eventually going to go back to looking like, tell me."
"……Ahh, right. Well, since now's a good time — Chisa, you're about the same height as me, and human-shaped."

Mine whispered back, and Chisa went silent for a moment, then said,
"Don't make jokes like that, Sis."
"She doesn't believe that part."
"Because. Being human-shaped and someone's little sister? Gross."
"'Gross'!?"
Mine had no idea what on earth Chisa's value system had turned into. But.
Chisa turned to Shirin and declared in a clear, firm voice,
"Anyway. I'm coming along too."
At the firm declaration, Shirin nodded broadly.
"——Your minds seem made up.
Understood.
Then — next Sunday, same as today, I'll come around noon."
Shirin said, then reached for one of the wall's doors, opened it.
"Well then, for today——"
"Ah! Oh right, Shirin-san!"
Mine's voice stopped Shirin, who had already stepped one foot into the door's other side.
"Hm? What?"
"By the way — how many worlds is it that need to be fixed, all told?"
"Hmm."
At the question, Shirin looked around at their surroundings, then said,
"About the same as the number of doors in this house.
Well then, until next Sunday."
He left that smile behind, and the door shut.
.....
『Eeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhhh!?』
The voices of Mine and Chisa echoed through the door-filled house.

Just when the world would return to how it should be, no one could say.
That was something no one knew.

A Story Experienced by an Older Sister's Friend

One night.
She was alone in her room when she felt something watching her.
All the family members had gone out.
Finding it strange, she looked around — the closet was open just a crack.
From that small gap that had opened, a fallen warrior with hair hanging wildly——

"Hahaha. That kind of thing happens at our house all the time."
Mine couldn't help retorting at the ghost story she was reading.

It felt a little hollow.

Door 2:

Fix the Terror of the Great Cosmos!

She woke up and remembered the previous day.
Had that really happened? Or had it been some kind of dream?
Lying face-up on her bed. Sonezaki Mine turned things over in her mind.
What met her eyes was a ceiling blanketed from edge to edge, without a single gap, in doors.
She had been startled when she first saw it, but lately she was getting a bit more used to it. Or rather — compared to what had happened yesterday, it hardly registered as anything anymore.
She remembered, suddenly. Last night she had started writing in her diary, then given up halfway through.
If that had been a dream, then the diary should be a dream too. With that thought she leaped up — and looked at her desk. There was the diary, light-pink with an illustration of Chosokabe Kanemitsu on the cover.
……Before the world had gotten like this, the illustration on it had been a rabbit character.
Not to mention — she found it a little disturbing that she could look at the illustration and recognize it as Chosokabe Kanemitsu.
Setting that aside, she flipped to yesterday's entry, and found a few lines in her own handwriting.

On such-and-such a date.
My little sister has become a tentacle.
This is no good.
I believe this is no good.

It was real.
Mine sank to her knees on the spot.

A little while back.
She had woken one morning to find the house covered in doors and her sister Chisa turned into a five-tailed squirrel.
Then a man called Shirin had appeared and explained that various worlds had become all mixed together, causing all sorts of things in the world to go strange.
In that way, Mine had come to travel through various worlds with Shirin and her sister Chisa, fixing them one by one.
And just this past Sunday.
The moment they had fixed one world —
Chisa, who had been a squirrel, changed into a tentacle.
.....Shirin had indeed said it.
In the process of returning to normal, there may be times when the world seems to get even stranger. But that is a necessary stage in returning to normal.
Yet.
A tentacle.
Chisa had been delighted, saying things like "So this is a step closer to how I'm supposed to look! Why on earth was I thinking a squirrel was normal!?"
She couldn't say it.
She simply could not say it.
That a tentacle is stranger than a squirrel.
If she said so, Chisa probably wouldn't believe her.
Chisa seemed to have no doubts whatsoever — even yesterday after they got home, she said it was her turn to cook and started getting dinner ready, humming to herself.
The dish that came out was zaru udon.
——Ahaha. Now you can't tell which is the tentacle and which is the udon.
She had been driven by the urge to blurt out something like that in desperate black humor, but she'd held back the whole time, convinced that if she said it, she herself would be the one who could never eat udon again.

There are in this world, after all, things that can be endured and things that cannot.
A little sister who is a tentacle falls firmly in the latter category. Very firmly.
In any case, to do anything about this situation, there was nothing for it but to keep fixing more and more worlds.
But before that, school still existed.
Come to think of it, today's breakfast duty was Mine's. Well, neither of the sisters minded cooking, and quite often whoever had a free moment would make the meal regardless of whose turn it was.
.....
——If she overslept, Chisa might make pasta for breakfast——

That premonition of cosmic terror arose from the depths of her brain, and Mine leaped hastily out of bed.
Noodle dishes were off the table for the foreseeable future.

The morning air, washed clean of the night's grime, was clear and refreshing.
Leaves on the street trees rustled in the breeze, glittering in the morning sun.
Good-mornings exchanged along the route to school. About one or two students in ten were tentacles.
O God. I will never forgive you.
Murmuring such words in her heart, Mine made her way to school.
Up until a moment ago, walking right next to her had been Chisa — a tentacle in a school uniform, about a meter tall — sliding and wriggling along. But she had spotted a friend from the same class and was now chatting with them as she walked.
Probably, all the little sisters in the world — all the girls with an older brother or sister — had become tentacles, just like Chisa.
.....She had no idea why it was specifically people in the position of "little sister" who had ended up this way.
Slither.
A disconcerting sensation crept along her cheek. She flinched and jumped back——
"Morning. Mine."
There was a tentacle in a blazer uniform.
A tentacle — but for some reason Mine recognized at a glance that it was her classmate Masako.
She recalled Masako had an older sister, as she remembered.
On the way to school, Masako had sometimes tapped Mine on the shoulder from behind — so from Masako's perspective, that's probably just what that had felt like.
"Oh...good morning. Masako.....?"
"Why the question mark? Actually, Mine, you look a little pale — you okay?"
Masako asked, writhing and twisting and tangling.
Of course.
There was no saying "you're disgusting."
Mine averted her eyes,
"Ahh. It's just, like, I had a bad dream or something."
"Ohhh. Yeah, I get that. A weird dream can really tank your mood."
"Yeah. Yeah it can. It really can."
She agreed in a hollow voice, while thinking inwardly about what lay ahead.
Classes. Then home. Then try to reach Shirin somehow.
If she could, she wanted to go fix another world — even on a weekday. She really did.
Fix and fix and keep on fixing.

The current situation, where every single sister in the world was a tentacle, was something she wanted to resolve as fast as possible.
Just how much time would it take before then?
Mine's hell had only just begun.

In a dim corner of the school's back courtyard.
Nibbling her bread.
Sonezaki Mine was exhausted.
The shadow of the hydrangeas was oddly soothing. Over here, she couldn't see any of the various things around her — specifically, tentacles.
She was thinking about contacting Shirin when she got home — but she wasn't sure she would hold out until the end-of-school bell.
By the time lunch break arrived, the damage she had taken was greater than expected.
She brought the orange juice carton to her lips——
Locked eyes with Chosokabe Ujiyuki depicted on the carton and paused for just a moment.
Right now, the Chosokabe were all the rage everywhere.
During breaks, some fraction of her classmates would get excited talking about Chosokabe matters, and in the textbooks, character-design versions of Chosokabe Shigeuji and Mitsuyuki and Kanemitsu were doing "check these key points" callouts with speech bubbles like "Know this to be crucial."
Incredibly annoying.
Why the Chosokabe. She couldn't even fathom the logic.
This was probably also a result of so many worlds mixing together and going strange.
That was still manageable.
But.
Getting tired of the Chosokabe-saturated textbooks and looking up — several people in the classroom were tentacles.
And also gym class. Don't make us do stretching in pairs.
Today, fortunately, one girl in the class happened to be sitting out, which meant Mine had been paired with a normal girl — but otherwise she would have been paired with Masako.
But humanity, do not rejoice yet. Gym class was coming up again in about two more days.
She absolutely had to resolve this situation before then. Absolutely.
And what she found hardest to endure above all — something she probably could have predicted if she'd thought carefully — was the school cafeteria.
It was large-scale, inexpensive, and the food wasn't bad. The two sisters, Mine and Chisa, used it regularly.

With a good fraction of the student body now turned tentacle, what scenes from hell were being enacted inside the cafeteria?
Mine had carelessly caught a glimpse of the edge of it, and hurriedly looked away — then abruptly changed her lunch plans from cream croquette set to bread and juice to go.
And so here she was, eating under the hydrangeas in the courtyard.
The momentary glimpse of the cafeteria interior, pretend as she might to have forgotten it, was carved into her very soul, chipping away at her mental state and her appetite.
Still, trying as best she could not to think about it, she tossed the last scrap of warbler bread into her mouth and chewed, when:
"——Whoa!?"
A startled voice rang out nearby. She looked up. A male classmate stood right there, striking an exaggeratedly shocked pose.
Kashimura — his first name was Kou, she thought.
The cheerful and casual type, comfortable with everyone regardless of gender.
.....Though "an overgrown kid who doesn't know when to quit" was another fair description.
Being male, of course, he was not a tentacle. That was a point of relief for Mine.
".....Sonezaki.....?"
Kashimura's expression of someone who'd found a strange creature still hadn't faded, though he did drop the exaggerated pose,
"What are you doing in a place like that?"
"Eating lunch."
She tried to answer calmly.
"Well, I can see you're eating lunch. But why here?"
"Mm. Just because."
She was vague about it and took a sip of Chosokabe-branded juice.
For some reason, Kashimura then sat himself down next to her on the other side of the hydrangeas and lowered his voice,
".....Could it be.....
Is it bullying? By the other girls, or something like that?"
"No. It's not."
At the off-target guess, Mine withdrew her straw from her mouth and murmured.
Of course he couldn't possibly hit on Mine's real problem.
That her sister was a tentacle — in this "normal" that had gone so wrong — was probably as taken-for-granted as her sister being younger, or her sister being female.
Mine knew that saying something so "obvious" would only earn her a strange look.
Kashimura looked troubled for a while, apparently thinking hard about something——
And whatever the result of that thinking was,

"Your little sister is pretty cute, though."
Bwugh.
She spat.
Yes. She absolutely spat.
"She's a tentacle!?"
Mine involuntarily blurted out, and Kashimura said firmly,
"That's what makes her good."
Was that a declaration? Yes, apparently so.
Having declared it, he looked away slightly, a bit bashfully,
"……But, I think you're pretty great too, Mine……"
——Much, much later.
Mine would realize this might have been a confession.
But at that moment,
"Don't compare me to a tentacle!"
Mine slammed the Chosokabe-branded juice carton into Kashimura's face with all her might, and dashed away from the spot.

The bell rang for the end of classes.
She kicked off the asphalt and made straight for home.
Through the front door, without even turning on the lights, Mine went straight to the living room.
"Here we go!"
With the shout. She reached for the knob of a door on the wall next to the bookshelf — a door that had no business being there — and grabbed it——
"——Mm."
Her movement stopped there.
Not yet. Too soon. She had that feeling. Something made her stop.
She waited just long enough to count to ten.
"Now!"
Mine turned the doorknob, pulled, thrust her right hand inside.
She grabbed and pulled — and on the end of her arm was a silver-haired man in a white shirt holding a staff.
"What!?"
The one letting out a surprised voice was none other than the man who had come from another world and was going around fixing various worlds — Shirin.
He usually wore a black coat, but right now he was in casual indoor clothes.
And in his hand, what he called a Wrench — a staff about a meter and a half long.
Mine had already pulled Shirin out from behind impossible doors several times before.
So,

"You don't have to be that startled."
She said what she thought.
But Shirin sat down uninvited on the living room sofa with an irritated look and said,
"I know you've dragged me out from behind these impossible doors more than once before……
But just now, this happened the moment I grabbed the Wrench.
That's too good a timing to be a coincidence. Of course I'll be startled.
……I know Mine-chan herself probably has no idea how she does it, so I won't ask why.
But have you ever thought — what if it had happened to be the moment I was in the bathroom, or in the bath?"
"……I had not considered that."
Mine sat down on the sofa across from him as she spoke.
She felt just a little bad — but right now her head was too full of other things.
"Never mind that――"
"……I do have concerns about that phrase and how much it brushes past legitimate problems……
Well, all right. You dragged me out here by force, which means you have something you want. What is it?"
Mine nodded,
"Chisa was asked to help out one of the clubs and isn't home from school yet.
But anyway, let's fix a world! Right now! As many as we can!"
"……Ahh……"
Apparently that told him everything he needed to know. Shirin's gaze drifted, and he scratched his head.
He had witnessed Chisa turning into a tentacle himself. So imagining what was driving Mine to desperation couldn't have been that difficult.
Still, Shirin made a sour face and said,
"But honestly, going out at this hour, I doubt we'll accomplish much.
I think it's better to settle in and do it properly — and that said, Mine-chan skipping school is also a problem.
So I think we should go about it the usual way――"
"This is not the time for that kind of leisurely attitude!"
His calm, completely detached tone made Mine's voice sharp.
"I understand how you feel, but――"
At that dismissive line,
"You don't understaaaand!"
Mine raised her voice.
She understood what Shirin meant — but if this state continued for long, what awaited her was the death of the soul.

Even Mine was at her limit, and she pressed her case desperately, describing her circumstances,
"It's not just Chisa, every single sister in the world is a tentacle and school is something I don't even want to say the word and that's not all, on TV Wakame-chan is a tentacle and in a movie program there was a scene with a tentacle screaming as it was attacked by a monster and I don't know where to look for being scared and also there's probably an anime with a totally ordinary protagonist suddenly being descended upon by multiple tentacles and come to think of it I think the actress in the romance drama I watch every week might be someone's little sister and the more I think about it more and more things are rui――"
Having said all that in one breath, her brain went mildly oxygen-deprived, and her vision went dark for a moment.
She hurriedly caught her breath, inhaled oxygen to her brain, pushed her disheveled hair back with her hand, and said,
"Ruined!"
Having said her piece she felt somewhat calmer. After a little more catching of her breath,
"……Also……even if the world is going strange, what kind of 'normal' from what kind of world got mixed in to cause a phenomenon like this……"
It was less a question and more a grumbling, but.
"……Even I don't know everything about every last thing……"
Shirin looked around, then patted the green sofa he was sitting on,
"This sofa, for instance.
It's green — but did some world have a green sofa? Not necessarily.
It could be that some blue thing from one world and some yellow thing from another mixed together strangely, and the sofa here just happened to reflect that as green.
It might not be that there's a world where little sisters are tentacles — there could be some entirely different factor having a strange influence."
He didn't explain it very clearly, but at this point the mechanics were beside the point.
The issue was:
"Anyway. I want to do something about this situation. And the only way to do it is to keep fixing world after world.
So please, help me."
At this plea from the bottom of her soul, Shirin let out a small sigh,
"……As I just said, going out at this hour, the results won't be……"
"Results are not something that 'come' — they're something you 'make'!"
"I mean, even said by a go-getter middle manager type, that's……"
Whether to go fix a world on a weekday or not.
Just as Mine and Shirin's back-and-forth deadlock was about to begin in earnest,

"I'm hoooome."
From the front door opening came Chisa's voice.
Mine's body went rigid with a jolt.
"Sis. I know you're home.
Man. I got asked to fill in for the ikebana club, and they're as intense as ever in there. My uniform is all muddy."
As she spoke, Chisa's voice steadily approached.
Mixed in with her voice, a sound like something dragging.
Normally Mine would wonder what kind of ikebana club this was — but right now. That wasn't the issue.
The terror closing in just ahead had taken over her brain.
"Anyway, I'll shower before dinner—"
And with those words, passing by the open doorway was a figure in underwear——

The world froze for an instant.

"Hyah?"
The tentat——no, Chisa noticed Shirin was there, and wriggled and squirmed, pulling back behind the door, then peeked in slightly from there,
"Wh-why is Shirin here!?
Sis, too! You could have said something! I showed him a s-strange side of me!"
Having said her piece, Chisa disappeared behind the door.
After that, the sound of something retreating.
At a service scene that no one had wished for, Mine stood frozen for some time, then turned to look — and Shirin was shaking violently, his lips drained to a pale blue.
He spent a while rubbing his own arms, waiting for the trembling to stop, then said,
"……It appears……the situation……is far more serious than I had imagined……
I understand……I'll cooperate fully……"
As he wrung out these words,

"That's all I ask."
Mine gave an imperious nod.

Mine's house had doors. Doors upon doors upon doors.
In this case, "doors upon doors" means far less "a lot" and far closer to "it's beyond what can be endured."
Not just the floors, walls, and ceilings — even the garden, the fence, and the back of closets opened to reveal more.
Of course some of them were perfectly ordinary doors that had been there all along.

But the majority were not.
From that day when various worlds had mixed together and gone strange — doors that had appeared suddenly, doors that had no business being there.
These doors, which normally would not open, which should not exist — they became doors to other worlds only when Shirin and the Wrench were together.
.....There were times when they opened right up when Mine wanted to reach Shirin, but that was another matter.
In any case.
Monday evening, seven-thirty.
After dinner, Mine and Chisa — Chisa having gone back to put on her coat — and Shirin, back in his coat with Wrench in hand, had gathered before a door attached to the inside of the bath.
"But why all of a sudden — going on a weekday? Can't we go on Saturday or Sunday like usual?"
Chisa raised the very reasonable question. Mine looked at her directly — then after just a moment, averted her eyes slightly,
"Adults sometimes say it, don't they. You only realize what you had once it’s gone."
"It does come up in dramas and things. That kind of line."
At Chisa's answer, Mine gave a small nod,
"Exactly."
"No. That makes no sense to me."
Of course Mine had no intention of explaining further.
At first, the world had gone strange, and Chisa had become a squirrel.
And Mine had learned the meaning of that saying. ——Or thought she had.
That the world being normal — that alone, that simple thing, had been happiness.
But when her sister became a tentacle.
Her sister not being a tentacle — how happy that alone had made her — she was made to understand it all over again, in full.
What kind of state the world they were stepping into would be in — neither the sisters nor even Shirin knew.
They had to make the person Shirin had found touch the Wrench three times directly.
——More precisely: bring that person and the Wrench into direct contact three times.
That was the way to fix a world.
Up until now they had fixed several worlds — sometimes it had gone so easily it was almost a letdown, other times it had proved impossible and they'd had to turn back.
What would today's world be like?
But whatever world it was. Whatever obstacles lay waiting.
It had to be done. Absolutely.
"Anyway. Let's go."

Whatever Mine's resolute expression conveyed, Chisa didn't argue further.
"Right."
Shirin nodded and reached for the knob.
The door to another world opened.

Determination makes a person strong.
To break the fate of the tentacle, Mine did her best. She did her very, very best.
The result of doing her very, very best.
——A row of sliding doors stretched deep into the interior.
Every one of those doors were thrown wide open to both sides.
Here and there, collapsed on the floor, were men dressed in sarashi cloth wrappings and holding bladed weapons — about twenty in total.
All of them had their eyes rolled back completely. Of course Mine was the one who'd done it.
Mine, you've done too much.
The person Shirin had identified this time around was a female boss who had mastered her craft completely.
Shirin and Chisa had naturally hesitated and said they should come back another time.
But Mine strode straight in and subdued the whole place in five minutes and thirty-five seconds.
The innermost room of the mansion. A young female boss dressed in black kimono stood watching Mine — who had approached with a fearsome aura — seated still, looking up.
"……Wh……why……?"
Her voice trembled slightly. Perhaps she wasn't choosing to stay seated but was unable to rise.
"Why……would someone like you……some young girl……"
At the murmur, Mine thought for a moment in her earnest way, then said,
"There was a commercial for a movie or something that used the line 'a maiden's feelings can work miracles.' I think it was something like that."
"Um. Mine-chan. There are miracles a maiden's feelings are permitted to work, and miracles they are not."
Shirin couldn't help murmuring from behind. From any angle, this fell firmly into the "not permitted" category.
Beside Shirin, Chisa stood equally dumbfounded,
"……I knew Sis was scary when she got serious……but even so — what was that? That fighting power."
"……Hmm……possibly……"
Whether answering Chisa or just thinking aloud, Shirin muttered,
"Each time we fix a world, various things in it change little by little……

I change too, and the Wrench. For me, like — a line appearing on the cuff of my coat, or my sideburns getting shorter or longer....."
"That's subtle."
Said Chisa.
"Also my cold sweat started smelling floral."
"......I thought that was cologne."
"But Mine-chan shows no sign of changing at all.
Though in reality, something must definitely be changing.
So possibly Mine-chan, while remaining unchanged on the outside, has her physical abilities affected by the changes——"
"——Shirin-san."
The voice Mine threw without turning around was filled with quiet killing intent.
"Y-yes!"
Not only Shirin at having his name called, but Chisa and even the female boss gave a small involuntary flinch.
"Three times. Hit her. Quickly."
"——U-understood!"
He hurried over and raised the Wrench toward the still-seated female boss.
"Pardon me. I'm just going to touch you three times."
He said, but the female boss was frozen, staring at Mine.
Shirin swung the Wrench down.
Once. Twice.
The third time the Wrench came down.
Mine turned back to look at Chisa behind her.
The world had been fixed just a little. Just what change had occurred——

The tentacle got a little glossier.

"Yes! That's right! Normally tentacles are this glossy!"
Chisa chattered excitedly nearby.
Beside her, Mine and Shirin were utterly, completely, devastated.

Mine's battle continued.
On weekdays. On weekends.
There were even times she fixed two worlds in a single day.
Fixing and fixing and fixing without end. Five days passed. Ten days passed.
And yet Chisa's form remained a tentacle.
Even warriors have their limits.
In this case, mainly psychological limits.

Has anyone seen what it looks like when a person transforms into a demon?
Sonezaki Chisa had.
Her own older sister Mine was, at this very moment, in the process of transforming into a demon.
She had absolutely no idea what the cause was.
The sisters were going around fixing various worlds together with a man named Shirin.
About two weeks ago, they had been fixing another world, and Chisa's appearance had changed from the strange five-tailed squirrel to her current tentacle form.
Around that time, something about her sister had started to seem off.
When Chisa asked what was wrong, Mine answered "nothing," but of course that couldn't be right.
Her gaze and the aura she gave off kept getting scarier and scarier, and now her face had become like that of a great demon king in the middle of a catastrophic work crisis, whose family member has just died and needs a funeral arranged, and who has had absolutely no sleep for two days.
Perhaps.
Without Chisa having noticed, some incredibly strange change had occurred the last time a world was fixed. Mine was aware of the change and was reaching the point where she couldn't bear it.
Thinking that, Chisa had even asked Shirin — but he had said he didn't know, and averted his gaze.
Chisa no longer knew what to do.
The other day, she had tried to encourage her by creeping up from behind while Mine was sitting and wrapping around her, and Mine had let out a tremendous scream.
"Nigyaaaaah" was uncalled for. No matter what the circumstances.
Today made exactly two weeks since Mine had started acting strangely. Looking at her, it was clear she was close to her limit.
Even so, if Chisa too started worrying and getting depressed, it would only accelerate both their negative feelings in a spiral.
The only things Chisa could do right now were: act cheerful and upbeat, and pray that somewhere in the world got fixed so Mine's worry disappeared.
Sunday before one in the afternoon. For the purpose of going to fix a world, as always, Chisa and Mine and Shirin with Wrench in hand had gathered before an impossible door.
"Come on, Sis. Let's head out bright and cheerful today too."
She said this and twined around Mine's hand.
Mine let out a tremendous scream.

In the depths of the darkness, a king sat.

His actual height was probably about two meters, but the fearsome aura he gave off made that great frame look even larger.
Hair blazing like crimson flames. Skin red as tears of blood. The blue glimmer he wore about him was a shard of ice that had once sealed the Demon King in the depths of hell.
Holy Emperor's Calendar, Year Phezze Seventeen.
The Demon King Zodias, released from hell's seal by a mad sorcerer, had led six thousand ten thousand demon armies in an invasion of the human realm. The civilization humanity had built was, at this very moment, on the verge of being reduced to ashes.
And yet.
"……Hmph……to think that mere humans would make it as far as this throne……"
The immortal Demon King murmured and glared at the tiny beings who had appeared before him.
The audience chamber at the deepest part of Zodias's fortress — the Evil Counterfeit Castle. Countless ghost flames burned blue along the walls, and the carpet leading to the throne was the color of half-congealed blood.
To Zodias's eyes, the group must have looked truly bizarre.
All of them in clothing he had never seen on humans. Not a single one wearing armor.
The one at the front was barehanded, looking for all the world like an ordinary young girl.
Slightly behind her, a silver-haired man in a black coat holding a staff.
And one more……was a tentacle in strange clothing.
For some reason, both the coat and the tentacle seemed to harbor a slight unease toward the one at the front.
"To have arrived here means you have defeated my demon army's four great marshals."
Indeed, on their way here, several strange individuals had appeared and said things about gravity and absolute zero before attacking — but Mine was past caring about any of that.
"Never mind that."
"'Never mind that,' you say?"
The corner of the Demon King's eye twitched slightly, but Mine pressed on regardless,
"This building has a basement, doesn't it.
There's someone in there we need to see — and if possible, we'd appreciate being shown down."
"……True enough, in the basement of this castle I am keeping humans I have captured as emergency provisions.
I see. You have come nobly to rescue the livestock."
At the Demon King's mocking words, Mine answered frankly,
"No. We need to hit them with a staff."
She said it frankly, but there are ways to say things.

It appears that to the Demon King, it sounded like flippant mockery.
"You dare ridicule this Zodias!"
The Demon King roared, rising from his throne.
A lion's roar — that was the only way to describe it. At the voice that shook the very world, Chisa and Shirin recoiled and drew back slightly.
In all of this, only Mine didn't move a millimeter.
"You there, mere humans — don't let bringing down a handful of marshals go to your heads!
Very well!
I shall carve proof that this Zodias is called Demon King into your very souls!
Know this — within my power of temporal stoppage, even the perception of one's own death is impossible!"
"What!?"
"Time stoppage — that's not scientif——"
Plat.
Chisa and Shirin — who had raised voices of astonishment — both froze in place.
Not just the two of them.
Even the ghost flames burning on the walls had ceased their flickering.
Time stopped.
The world stopped.
Within it, Demon King Zodias laughed his great laugh.
"Foolish……foolish!
In the end, that is your limit! Know the smallness of the human vessel!"
To wield his power, he required no incantation, no gesture, no word. He had only to will it so —
and time stopped. The world stopped.
Such was the power befitting the title of King of Demons — lord of the impossible.
The King allowed his laughter to subside, then said,
"Hmm……but this is perhaps overdoing it.
Even if I wished to make them understand, whatever I say within stopped time——"
"Never mind that."
What stopped the Demon King was an impossible summons — and above all, the profound anger that seethed in that voice.
"What……did you……?"

Zodias said in stupefaction, and turned his gaze anew to the voice's owner — Mine.
"I asked you to show us to the person in the basement."
Mine said it, restraining her emotions, but patiently.
Of course Mine understood. That their approach was not exactly polite by any measure.

The people who had appeared on their way here — those calling themselves marshals — hadn't listened to a word of explanation, just came at them saying incomprehensible things, so Mine had dealt with all of them by slapping.
They had struck first, but there was a slightly uncomfortable feeling about dealing with them because they wouldn't listen.
Of course that was trivial compared to the matter of doing something about her sister being a tentacle.
At the very least, she wanted to have a proper conversation with this Demon King person.
"Wh-what!? Why can a mere human move!?
Within this stopped time!"
Mine made a small bow to the shouting Demon King and said,
"I'm sorry. Right now I have various things going on, and I'm not in a state of mind to deal with something like time stoppage."
"What!? Is time stoppage a matter of one's state of mind!?"
At this truth now revealed, even the Demon King could not hide his agitation.
Mine didn't entirely understand what the Demon King was agitated about, but in any case what she understood was that continuing to talk like this was going nowhere.
Come to think of it, there had been something on TV the other day — if you're too far apart from someone, it's hard to open up to them.
Right now, there was also a physical distance between her and the Demon King, and the room was a bit dim. If she talked somewhere they could see each other's faces clearly, he might understand.
Thinking this, Mine took a step forward.
——Of course Mine was unaware.
In the dim light, bathed in blue glow, her own eyes were shining with the color of a beast.
The Demon King involuntarily stepped back half a step — then realized it and froze,
"This I — stepping back before a human……!
No……impossible! Surely, human form notwithstanding, you are some servant of the gods!?"
"——My little sister is a tentacle——"
Mine answered the Demon King's misguided question. Without breaking stride.
"To fix that, I will surpass gods and demons alike."
She only meant to state her resolve, but the Demon King's expression visibly stiffened.
"I……this Zodias's power is not limited to time stoppage!
Then become fodder for my blade that slays even gods!"
The Demon King thrust his right hand into the void and clenched it, then pulled it smoothly back — and there, gripped in his hand, was a blade of darkness that had not existed there a moment before.

"Perish!"
He roared and closed the distance to Mine in a single breath!
His strike — not just god-speed but a god-slaying slash that could cleave gods themselves! A blow the human eye should not even be able to perceive the afterimage of——
"That is dangerous!"
Mine raised a voice of protest — on "that" she sidestepped, rapping the joint of the Demon King's thumb with the knuckle of her fist to send the sword flying; on "is dan-" she grabbed his collar with her left and slapped him with her right. Then a backhanded slap on the return. Her final "gerous" blended with the lingering resonance of the slap and rang out through the void.
Mine didn't particularly like corporal punishment.
But people who casually do dangerous things like waving swords around — she felt it was important that they be made to understand that doing reckless things could result in painful consequences for oneself.
Zodias stood in a daze for a moment — then ground his back teeth together with a creaking sound, glaring at Mine before him with blazing eyes,
".....A slap.....
A slap, you say!? This Demon King, slapped!?
You little girl! Don't——"
Smack.
"Ow."
He showed no sign of remorse so she slapped him again.
And.
Smack. Smack.
Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack.
"O-ow-ow-ow-ow, wait, lit- little, wait, wait a, time out, ow, ow, hey now, o- miss, oh, sorry-sorry, no, ow, sorry, sorry, I'm sorry! I'll apologize! I'll apologize properly!"
By now the time stoppage had been released, and behind them Chisa and Shirin could only draw back and back and back at what Mine was doing——

Holy Emperor's Calendar, Year Phezze Seventeen.
Demon King Zodias, released from the seal of hell, had been on the verge of reducing human civilization to ashes.
But at that moment. A door from another world opened, and a hero appeared.
The hero repelled all four of the demon army's great marshals and Demon King Zodias himself. With slapping.

Subjected to the hero's eternal two-handed slapping, Zodias prostrated himself and apologized unreservedly, saying "My sincerest apologies. I got a little carried away just because I happen to be the Demon King."
In genuine anguish, he retreated into the ice of hell's seal.
And thus this world came to know a long and lasting peace — but Mine couldn't have cared less about any of that.
The basement of the Demon King's home.
Among the people who had been held captive, the one standing before Mine and the others was a girl with pointed ears.
This girl was the person Shirin had identified — the one who needed to touch the Wrench three times.
"Did you……come to rescue me……?"
Whether the question in her voice was because she didn't understand the situation, or because Mine's aura was a little frightening — it was hard to say.
There were many other prisoners, but even with the cell door open, for some reason everyone kept their distance from Mine, trembling, and made no move to escape.
Perhaps they had mistaken it all for some new kind of trap.
Of course Mine didn't care about that either.
The issue was — what would happen now.
"Shirin-san. Quickly."
"Yes. At once."
As ordered, Shirin walked briskly over to the girl and raised the Wrench,
"I'm just going to do something like a charm right now.
I'll just touch this Wrench to your head three times. Don't be scared."
With that, he brought the Wrench down gently three times — kon, kon, kon.
Mine's throat made a small sound.
She forced her stiffened body to move, and slowly turned to look at Chisa behind her.
The world had been fixed just a little. What kind of change would there be——

There was a four-tailed squirrel.
The world.
Had it always shone so brightly?
"Chisa——!"
Mine leaped at her sister, scooped her up, rubbed her cheek against her at the speed of light, and tasted the happiness welling up from the bottom of her heart.
Of course something was wrong about feeling happy at her sister being a squirrel rather than a tentacle — but the undeniable fact was that things had become considerably more reasonable.

Mine, who had endured those grueling days and fought so hard, had every right to savor this happiness.
She held the squirrel in jeans tightly.
And Chisa, for her part,
".....I.....was a tentacle this whole time....."
Uttered a heavy murmur that rose from the depths of hell, with hollow, clouded eyes.

After that.
For a while, Chisa was terribly, deeply depressed about the fact that she had been a tentacle — and that in itself was quite an ordeal.
But that is another story.

"Isn't Sis acting weird lately?"
"Ah, yeah."
Stared at straight on by Chisa, Shirin averted his eyes slightly as he nodded.
"Sometimes she's really fired up about going to fix another world the moment she gets home from school, and then other times, like today, she says 'not today.'"
Chisa moved and gesticulated with her tentacle-waving,
"And when we're not going out to other worlds, she goes outside somehow."
"Like going out to eat?"
With the present Chisa right there in front of him, he found it hard to imagine anyone having an appetite — but of course Shirin couldn't say that aloud.
"No. She always comes back by dinner.
I have a hunch that Sis's worry might be related to those outings.
Hey. I'm sure Sis will go out today too, so let's follow her together."
".....Ehh.....that seems like it might be a problem, doesn't it....."
"Why are you making that reluctant face? It might help us figure out what's making Sis worry. Don't tell me you're going to say something cold like you don't even care that much."
"I get it! I get it, so! Don't twine around me so much!"
And so the two of them began tailing Mine.

She was going to counseling.

For a little while after that, Shirin felt oddly guilty, and found he couldn't look Mine in the face directly.

Door 3:

Fix the Collapse of Human Civilization!

A robot crossed the distant sky.
Watching the sight absently,
“Ahh. It really is flying.”
She murmured to herself internally.
A few days ago, the evening TV news had covered it. This year, too, the migrating group of robots had flown in near Hakone, heralding the season.
Which was, apparently, a perfectly ordinary thing.
"Robot" being an abbreviation for robot.

The TV had shown robots, about twenty meters tall in total height, that had landed on some pond and were cooling their main power reactors.
Her sister Chisa, who had been watching the TV with her, had murmured something like, well, it's that time of year again.

She had wanted to retort — what kind of season is that — but given the current state of things where so much had gone strange, saying it would only feel hollow.
As for robots, apparently they were sometimes used as seasonal words in haiku

But even as Mine tried her hardest to escape into such distractions,
"Hey — did you find Kashimura!?"
The voice of the art teacher, calling for a missing student, flew into her ears whether she liked it or not.

That a second-year high school student, not far from college entrance exams, still had an art class showed either a relaxed approach or a commitment to emotional development.
Though at this age, an outdoor sketching assignment was a bit embarrassing.
No matter how much more effort she put into escaping the present reality —
On the page of the sketchbook she'd brought from home, a small door was still hanging

half-open, and nothing changed.

Her classmate seemed to have disappeared into that door. She was fairly, very sure of it. Watching the robot cross the distant sky, Sonezaki Mine was spending her time thinking, at great length, about how she could possibly avert her eyes from this reality——

Mine's house had doors. Doors packed everywhere.
A little while back, Mine had woken one morning to find the house where she lived with her sister Chisa covered in doors of all sizes — on the floor, walls, and ceiling, even on the posters stuck to the walls — doors that had no business being there.
And not just the house — all sorts of things in the wider world had gone strangely wrong, her sister Chisa had become a squirrel, traffic lights were undulating, mailboxes were meandering, antennas were goggling.
She knew the description was hard to follow, but the real things were even harder to follow, so what could she do.
And yet everyone other than Mine didn't seem to think any of this was strange.
While she was struggling with this, a man called Shirin had appeared and explained that various worlds had become mixed up together, causing the world to go strange.
One thing and another, Mine and Chisa had ended up going around with him, fixing the various worlds that had gone wrong — accessible through doors that appeared where they had no business appearing.
But she hadn't thought for a moment that a doorway to another world would appear on an in-progress page of a sketchbook that had been sitting in the house.
Anyway.
The moment school let out, Mine had dragged her sister Chisa along and sprinted home.
"But Sis,"
Her sister Chisa — who had heard the story as they walked home, a four-tailed squirrel in a school uniform, fifteen centimeters tall, riding Mine's shoulder — passed through the front door of the house and opened her mouth thoughtfully,
"Did he really go into the door? Could it just be that he ditched class somewhere? You need to be sure about that. Otherwise you'd end up wandering around looking for someone who isn't even there."
"Almost certainly."
Turning on the lights in the entryway and hallway as she stepped out of her shoes, Mine nodded gloomily,
"The classmate who disappeared — his name is Kashimura Kou."
She didn't know what character the Kou was written with, but that's what the boys in class called him.

Optimistically described: cheerful. Pessimistically described: an overgrown kid. Either way, he stood out in the class.
And naturally, bits of gossip about him reached her ears here and there — specifically,
"There's no way he'd ditch. Apparently Kashimura is an incurable sketching enthusiast."
"What kind of character concept is that?"
Chisa frowned, but Mine was in no better position to understand.
And of course there was other evidence too.
"Also, I'd put my sketchbook down and stepped away briefly.
A friend said they saw Kashimura flipping through it.
.....Probably that's when it happened."
At the explanation, Chisa's mouth bent into a frown.
"Sounds certain."
"Right. So I need to do something as quickly as——"
The words she was about to say were cut off.
Among the many doors facing the hallway — doors that had no business being there — one opened with a rattle of its knob.
A young man with silver hair peeked his face out from behind it.
He wore a black coat, and in his right hand was a long staff.
"Ah. You just got home right now, by any chance?"
The young man — Shirin — spotted the sisters and called out casually.
"Shirin-san, perfect timing!"
Mine's face lit up. But Shirin's immediately went sour,
".....Which means.....something happened again?"
"Yes!"
At Mine's cheerful nodding smile, he let out a light sigh.
Initially the arrangement had been once a week, going around fixing various worlds together.
But with various things coming up, eventually the plan had become for Shirin to check in once a day like this, just in case.
She thought idly about what it meant to have a contingency plan come in handy so quickly in life — but Mine went ahead and told Shirin what had happened.

They bought drinks and rice balls at the convenience store.
Dinner would be in the other world.
On the living room table where everyone had gathered was the opened sketchbook.
On one of the completely white pages — a white door, also. Not exactly half-open, more like not fully closed, its knob mechanism catching on the sketchbook when turned.
"But why did the door in this spot even open?"
Mine cocked her head and murmured.

Of course before the world had gotten like this, there were no doors in sketchbooks.
The doors that had appeared in various spots around the house — doors that had no business being there — shouldn't open under normal circumstances.
"There's no point thinking about that. They open when I and the Wrench are together, but——"
Shirin gave the staff in his hand a small wave.
To fix the damaged other worlds, all he needed was for someone he'd identified to be touched by the staff called the Wrench three times.
"For instance, Mine-chan herself has opened some of these doors before.
Maybe sometimes, someone can open them by some accident.
Anyway, the first priority right now is to find that — Kashimura? — but……
Searching for someone in the dark could be quite difficult.
Of course there's nothing for it but to try — but we should keep that in mind."
True — if the other person was huddled somewhere in the place they'd crossed into, it would be simple enough. But knowing Kashimura's personality, he was probably happily wandering about all over the place.
"So this time, finding Mine-chan's classmate takes priority over fixing the world.
I don't know what conditions the other world is in, but we won't do anything reckless.
If it gets dark and we run out of leads, we come back for tonight and try again another day.
That works?"
Saying this, Shirin opened the sketchbook's door.
The inside, lit by the living room's fluorescent light, looked like nothing more than a small square box with a small door in the back.
At his words, the sisters nodded in agreement,
"Fortunately, tomorrow is a day off from school.
If today doesn't work out, we cut it short, and start fresh early tomorrow morning."
"It’s settled then." Shirin stood up and said,
"Let's go, you two. Same as always — hold onto me or the Wrench."
No need to be told twice — Mine gripped the hem of Shirin's coat, Chisa clung to the Wrench.
Shirin crouched down and pushed his head into the door opened on the sketchbook.
It was about the size of a cat door, but Mine and the others passed through without the slightest resistance.
"Here we go."
Together with Shirin's slightly old-mannish exclamation, the door opened with a clunk.
Passing through that door too as always——
"Don't move!"
But what rang out then wasn't the usual announcement from Shirin that they'd arrived.

Mine looked around hurriedly.
She noticed they were surrounded by multiple people pointing guns at them.

Not all other worlds are safe.
Mine suddenly recalled — Shirin had said something like that.
The ones surrounding them were five or six men and women in work-clothes-like outfits and green helmets.
The area had apparently been a town at some point, but now it was a heap of scorched rubble. One partially-standing concrete wall had the door they'd just come through stuck to it.
Mine thought of the images she'd occasionally seen on TV of conflict zones.
This time around, they appeared to have landed in a world that was not exactly safe.
"……Ugh……"
Shirin groaned and slowly raised both hands. The normally energetic Chisa was also frozen stiff, still clinging to the Wrench.
One of the men, gun trained steadily, directed a question at Mine and the others,
"Are you――"
Mine suddenly noticed. The man's voice was slightly hoarse.
From fear.
Something.
The man continued.

"Are you――sisters!?"
.....
『Eh?』
Mine and the others' voices overlapped in bewilderment.
Not understanding the question, they looked at each other involuntarily.
"I'm asking whether you're sisters!"
Somehow the man who was asking seemed desperate, on the verge of firing his gun.
"Sisters, you say――"
Chisa, still clinging to Shirin, started to say something — at that moment.
"Stop. They couldn't be sisters."
A clear, resolute voice made everyone turn in that direction. A woman with a gun.
A dull green tank top and a red headband tied across her forehead announced with full force: I am a female resistance fighter.
She was probably about the same age as Mine. Though perhaps she only looked grown-up because of the outfit and was actually a bit younger.
The woman swept her gaze over everyone with guns raised,
"Think about it. If they were sisters, we'd all be dead by now."

Apparently they'd die.
"……Th-that's true……"
Someone murmured softly, and everyone relaxed, lowering their gun barrels.
The female warrior fixed a guarded gaze on Mine and the others,
"You don't seem to be sisters……but why, and how, did you come to be in a place like this? You can't be unaware of the current situation."
"……Erm……"
Once again Mine and the others exchanged glances.
They understood neither the situation nor the meaning of the questions. In every sense they were at a loss for an answer — but even so.
——We're going back and forth between various worlds, fixing them, by going around hitting the people we find with a staff——
Stating this electromagnetic fact in the current circumstances seemed very likely to get them shot without further discussion.
Of course Mine also knew from experience that leaving explanations to Shirin didn't usually go very well.
So, for situations like this, she'd thought ahead and prepared a lie: the "we lived in the countryside so we don't know" pattern — which she decided to apply with a little modification.
"The thing is, we were living out in the countryside……and a little while back we lost all means of contact, and we got worried about a relative here, and came to check on them. His name is Kashimura, a boy about the same age as me……
What has happened here?"
Playing innocent and asking, Shirin beside her gave a thumbs up and a wink,
"Nice explanation, Mine-chan!"
Don't say "nice." It makes the lie obvious.
Inwardly anxious, Mine watched — but the woman made a slightly suspicious face and said,
"You didn't know the current situation……what kind of countryside were you living in……?"
For the moment, at least, the broad strokes seemed to have been believed.
Or perhaps they simply had no interest in Mine and the others' identities.
"A few years ago——"
"Luka!"
A man's voice cut off the woman's words.
From behind some rubble a short distance away, one man was looking over at them.
"There she is! Sage's unit is making contact!"
A tremor ran through the group.
"Got it! I'm coming!"

The woman called Luka answered, then turned to Mine and the others,
"Come with me. I'll show you.
What the world has come to."
Saying that, without waiting for an answer, she turned on her heel and walked off with the men across the ruined ground, as sure-footed as if it were nothing.
『.....』
Mine and the others looked at each other.
In the end, they decided to follow the woman.

Men with guns were crouching silently in the shadows of rubble.
Filmed from behind, their expressions couldn't be seen, but it was still clear that the men were terribly tense.
Everyone in the room had their eyes on that footage right now.
They'd crawled through the gaps in the rubble of a building that could only be called ruins, then made their way underground — left and right, on and on — until they reached this place.
A square concrete room with various desks and boxes and assorted things, and on the desks, multiple small TVs.
It looked just like the makeshift command center of a military-ish organization Mine had seen in a movie once.
The TVs each showed a different image, but the one everyone had gathered to watch was a single particular one.
Mine, at the back, couldn't see it very well — but Chisa had already climbed to the top of Mine's head and secured herself a good vantage point.
The screen was still for a while, but then.
『.....Here it comes.....』
The small voice was someone in the screen murmuring.
Then came the sound of small footsteps. Closer and closer.
Before long, what appeared from behind the rubble was——
A girl of about five years old in a slightly too-big, fluttery dress.
A large blue bow was bobbing on her chick-yellow head.
『GO!』
At someone's signal, the hidden men all stood up at once and trained their gun barrels on the girl!
『Fweh!?』
The girl immediately froze with a jolt, shaking in tiny trembles, looked at the men with tearful eyes,
『Wh.....why are you pointing guns.....? It's scary.....
Y.....you're mean!

I hate all you big brothers!』
The moment she said it.
『Guhah!』
Every last one of the men spat blood.
Leaving the collapsed men behind, the girl flipped the hem of her skirt and trotted away into the distance. She tripped partway and fell once.
After that — silence.
Eventually.
One of the men watching the footage reached out and switched off the screen,
"……Sage's team……annihilated……"
A groan of mortification, as if coughing up blood.
Luka also slammed her fist into the wall,
"Damn……as I thought, it's impossible!"
『What is?』
Mine, Chisa, and Shirin said in unison.
Luka turned tired eyes on Mine and the others,
"……Exactly what you saw……"
『What, exactly?』
The three of them again.
"……Fair enough……if you don't know, it's understandable you can't believe it……
Let me explain from the beginning, in order……"
Luka let out a small breath, turned her gaze somewhere distant, and said,
"Excessive sister civilization has——"
"Hold on."
Mine involuntarily called a halt within the first fifteen characters of the explanation.
Having her flow interrupted so soon, Luka turned a slightly displeased gaze on Mine,
"What?"
"No, I mean, what is it.
What is 'sister civilization'?"

At the question, not just Luka but every person in the room frowned.
Apparently in this world, "sister civilization" was a fairly common term.
Luka looked halfway exasperated,
"We're starting that far back?
When civilization depends on machines, it's machine civilization. If it depends on sisters, it's obviously sister civilization."
"Right."
『You just accepted that!?』
Chisa and Shirin's voices harmonized, but of course Mine hadn't accepted it at all.

It was just that at this rate, she couldn't tell how long it would take to get to a satisfying explanation, so she'd played along.
"If you accept that, I'll continue.
Excessive sister civilization promoted the rapid development of sisters.
But sisters that became too highly developed eventually gained self-awareness, and bared their fangs at humanity."
"Excuse me. Never mind. Forget it."
Chisa started to say something and gave up.
Luka continued without apparent concern.
"Under Sister King Ria — who advocated the establishment of a new world ruled by sisters — sisters from all over the world rallied together and raised the flag of revolt against humanity.
Humanity, which had become completely dependent on sisters and was caught off-guard to boot, fell without putting up much of a fight.
As such, we, too, are engaged in resistance activities, though we are, to be honest, being pushed back considerably."
"Sister King....."
Not a Queen? Mine thought to herself — but that seemed like a minor point given the things that actually warranted a retort, so she kept it to herself.
"——That's how it is.
I understand you're worried about your relative, but this is a battlefield right now.
If you're not prepared to fight, you'd better go home."
At that, Mine, Chisa, and Shirin looked at each other.
"——Ah. Let us just consult for a moment."
They stepped a little away from the others and put their heads together.
".....What to do.....?"
Shirin spoke first, with a troubled expression.
"There's a war going on.....well, it seems like a dangerous situation.....but.....uh.....how to put this....."
"It's nonsense."
Chisa stated bluntly.
"I mean, what is sister civilization even supposed to be? That's just impossible."
"Being told 'I hate you' and then spitting blood — what physical phenomenon is that, even — when you think about it, you're right, Chisa-chan, there really is no other word for it than nonsense."
Shirin also smiled wryly.
Mine had complicated feelings inwardly about having the word "nonsense" uttered by a four-tailed squirrel in a school uniform and a person from another world holding a strange staff — but,

"Well, this is apparently the 'normal' of this world.
The bigger question is what we do from here."
At Mine's prompt, both Shirin and Chisa fell silent for a moment.
In this world, there was a war between humans and sisters, and human civilization was in crisis.
By any logic, this should be an extremely dangerous world.
By any logic, it also somehow seemed like it would probably be fine.
"It'll be fine, won't it?"
At last, when Chisa spoke, it was the opening move.
"Yeah."
"Let's go. It'll be fine."
With that kind of attitude.
The three of them set off into a wasteland of human-sister bloodshed!

They were seen off at ground level by Luka, the female resistance fighter. They exchanged farewells and turned their backs.
"……Wait."
Luka's voice called out to their backs.
The sun had already begun to sink in the west, casting deep shadows over the ruins where Mine and the others stood.
Mine and the others turned. Luka kept her expression in shadow and said,
"You're going to go. To look for someone you know."
"No, we're going home."
Mine said readily.
The area was full of rubble. Hoping for any light from the bent streetlamps was pointless.
Which meant once the sun set, it would be pitch dark. Searching for Kashimura in that, with no idea where he was, was impossible.
She was certainly worried about Kashimura — but today she'd planned to go home as planned, eat dinner, watch some variety show on TV, take a long soak in a warm bath, drink cold juice after, wrap herself in the futon in bed and sleep soundly, recover her energy thoroughly, and then set out again in the morning light.
Of course there was the risk that Kashimura might encounter one of the sisters who were a threat to humanity in this world — but……
For some reason she had a very strong feeling it would be fine.
So that was why she intended to just go home today.
"You're lying."
Watching Mine and the others, Luka declared.
"Even after hearing that the sisters have revolted, there is no fear in your eyes."

Well, being told to be afraid was a tall order.
"Whether you don't understand the situation or simply don't appreciate how terrifying sisters are……
Either way, know at least this.
If you encounter a sister — run. Immediately. Otherwise you will really die."
Mine didn't think that was true, but she decided to go along with it,
"But there is someone we have to find."
At her words, Luka was struck silent.
Slowly. Eyes downcast in shadow.
"……I don't want to see anyone else made a victim of the sisters……"
"Ah."
At Shirin's vague acknowledgment, Luka was silent a while longer, then said,
"The one responsible for this chaos……Sister King……Ria is――
My――! My little sister!"
At that blood-spitting confession.
The three of them said in unison,
『Hmm.』
"That reaction is so flat! I — I thought you'd either blame me or sympathize with me, but you're actually just indifferent!?"
"Well, we have absolutely no interest in it."
Strangely flustered by their poor reaction, Luka heard from the squirrel on Mine's shoulder, delivered flatly.
"……Even a mascot robot says it has no interest……"
Luka said, half dumbfounded. It seemed she had interpreted Chisa as a robot.
She hung her head and let out a small breath, then said,
"But it's made me feel a little better, oddly enough. Thank you.
Right. I don't know if it's related to who you're looking for.
But one of my companions said that this afternoon, they spotted a man in unfamiliar clothing wandering around this area."
『――!』
At those words, Mine and the others looked at each other.
Given the timing, it had to be Kashimura.
"Where did that person go!?"
Mine asked with urgency, but Luka shook her head left and right,
"I'm sorry, I can't say any more than that. Apparently he vanished from sight while they looked away."
Of course. So that's why Luka and the others were keeping watch in this area, where the suspicious individual had been spotted — which is how they'd encountered Mine and the others.

"I see……
Ah, then — is there anywhere nearby that someone who doesn't know the local situation would likely stop by?"
"Somewhere someone who doesn't know the situation would stop by?"
Luka's voice went stiff.
"I have a thought……not entirely……"
She hesitated just a little, then said,
"……Staying quiet would amount to the same thing……so it might be better to mention it."
She murmured, then extended a finger and pointed in one direction.
What lay that way was invisible from here, blocked by ruins and rubble.
"A little ways that way, you'll come to an open area.
From there you should be able to see it.
At the end of a straight-running road — a fortress surrounded by walls.
Of anything in this vicinity, it's undoubtedly the most conspicuous landmark.
That is——
The sisters' headquarters: Sister Fortress."
One could certainly argue that a headquarters should be called a castle rather than a fortress — but regardless, the three of them said in unison,
『Hmm.』
"No! Be a little more excited about this!
You have absolutely no sense of danger! It's the headquarters! This is an active combat zone! There are loads of sisters, so if you advance carelessly it could genuinely be very bad!"
Luka was once again putting great force into explaining something with great force.
But Mine's thoughts had already drifted to what would be on TV that evening.

In the morning light, it was indeed impossible to describe as anything but a fortress.
Surrounded on all sides by high walls, watchtowers jutted skyward at every point. The imposing structure standing in the ruined world looked as though it rejected everything with its spiked exterior.
"It really does look like a fortress."
At the end of a road buried in rubble, facing the fortress, Chisa said quietly from Mine's shoulder.
Not "looks like" — it literally was a fortress, but neither Mine nor Shirin noticed the slip.
"Well, let's go."
At Shirin's easygoing signal, Mine and the others started down the road.
The asphalt was cracked here and there, with rubble scattered over some of it, but not so much as to make walking difficult.

In the quiet world, only the footsteps of Mine and Shirin — two sets — echoed.
But before they'd gone very far.
A third, smaller set of footsteps could be heard.
They drew closer at a trot, and from behind rubble scattered in the way, the form of a tiny girl appeared.
——A sister!?
By the time the thought came, it was too late! The girl trotted right up close to Mine and the others, and looked up at them with large eyes,
"Umm, you shouldn't go this way."
『Ungh……!』
The near-zero-range attack made Mine and Shirin involuntarily groan!
They had assumed the sisters' power wouldn't work on them — but actually experiencing it, something deep, fundamental in Mine's heart was shaken significantly.
Unable to look away from those round, upturned eyes staring at her——
Still somehow mustering her willpower,
"……You know, someone that big sister knows went this way, and I was wondering if you might have seen him?"
"……I won't say."
The puffed cheeks and averted face was answer enough.
"Big sister has to find that person no matter what——"
Cutting Mine off, the girl trembled her voice with glimmering eyes,
"But nooo, you shouldn't."
『Uurgh……!』
Mine and Shirin groaned again. They didn't spit blood, of course, but somehow they were beginning to feel like they should do as this child said.
——Can't be helped——
Such words were naturally rising to Mine's throat.
She understood that saying them would mean abandoning Kashimura.
But being stared at with those trembling eyes.
Before she knew it.
"……Gu……"
The very moment Mine's mouth began to form the sound——
"So annoying."
The devastatingly literal line was delivered without hesitation by Chisa, who stood tall on Mine's shoulder and glared down at the sister!

"Uh-wahwa! At zero-area position one o'clock, strategic disruption type sister Mariko-chan P-107 has started crying!"
"What?"

At the report from the reading-glasses-wearing, book-loving sister-operator, the twin-tailed, sharp-eyed sister commander in military uniform raised her voice in shock.
At the center of Sister Fortress — the stronghold of the sisters who had raised the banner of revolt against humanity — rose the central command tower in all its grandeur.
The vast command room near the top was packed with countless desks, countless terminals, and countless sisters, with several large display screens on the walls.
Until now, all that had been happening was calm, routine communications. But.
One sister had cried. And what's more, at a location not far from here at all.
That was information that couldn't be ignored.
"What happened!? Is she hungry!?"
Even as she asked, the sister commander felt a sense of foreboding.
Sisters deployed throughout the area crying because they tripped, felt lonely, got hungry, or remembered something scary was not at all unusual.
But the operators should know that too. Normally they wouldn't bother reporting it.
Then——?
"Well, the thing is,"
The operator scanned the data appearing one after another on her glasses,
"It seems someone said something mean to her!"
"Someone? Who!?"
"I don't know……fwah!?"
Upon seeing newly incoming data, the operator's glasses nearly slipped down!
"What is it now!"
"At the same location, now strategic supplies solicitation and acquisition type sister Mika-chan L-202 has also started crying!
There's no doubt! Something is approaching, making the sisters deployed in the area cry one by one!"
At that near-scream, agitation ran through the command room. Some sisters even began to sniffle in fear.
"Impossible! Among these foolish humans, there cannot be anyone capable of saying mean things to us sisters!"
Dismissing the chill running up her spine, the sister commander raised a bluff-sounding voice.
——At that moment.
"What's happening!"
The lisping voice that rang out made the unease that had dominated the command room vanish in an instant.

"——This is——"
The commander spun around, and there — having just come through the door — was

one sister!
A stalwart suit of armor that was clearly too big, a face hidden all the way to the mouth.
A crimson mantle trailing on the floor, and of course a proper mascot pet in tow.
This dignity. This presence.
The aura — call it, perhaps, sister power — that this sister emanated, aura that no other sister could possibly hope to project——
"Sister King!"
The commander snapped to unwavering attention.
Yes. She was the sister of sisters. Humanity's natural enemy in this world.
Sister King — Ria.
Probably about five years old.
"Here, this is for you!"
Sister King passed the commander one milk caramel, squeezed in her fist.
Of course an ordinary sister would eat all of it herself. To share with another — what magnanimity. That was the quality that made the king a king.
"So, what's happening!"
At the repeated question, the commander said,
"It seems someone is approaching, making the sisters deployed in the area cry one by one by saying mean things!"
"Oh, really!"
In the command room.
About ten seconds of silence fell.
Then Sister King said,
"So, what do we do!"
It seemed she didn't do instructions.
"Erm."
The commander popped the milk caramel into her mouth, then turned toward the operators and said,
"Send the nearby sisters over there!
Not all of them! About half!"
At the command, the operators' movements grew more frantic.
Watching that scene silently.
Sister King Ria wasn't thinking about anything in particular.

The battle was, in a certain sense, desperate.
Gross, smelly, lame, annoying. Every time those elementary-school-level insults were launched from Chisa's mouth, the sisters who came to intercept Mine and the others cried, one after another after another.
"……Um……Chisa……"

Moving step by step, steadily, down the road leading to Sister Fortress, Mine called to the fifteen-centimeter squirrel on her shoulder.
"What, Sis?"
"……Somehow……this situation……I feel incredibly guilty……"
If she were to turn around now, she would see — stretching in a line along the road they'd walked — a scene of sisters littering the landscape, with small girls crouching and crying every few meters.
Of course she had no courage to look back.
Shirin was also looking genuinely uncomfortable,
"Somehow……our current position is completely that of the bad guys, isn't it."
"Don't worry about it."
But Chisa said breezily.
"To those kids, I probably look like a tiny, cute little squirrel.
And they're just startled because that little squirrel suddenly said something nasty to them."
Mine thought that might actually leave some kind of trauma instead — but.
They had to find Kashimura, and if possible they should also fix this world.
Even knowing that, making small children cry was just relentlessly uncomfortable.
"……Ah."
Shirin groaned at a moment like that.
As Mine and Chisa directed their gazes at him, he looked toward Sister Fortress and said,
"Well. The person I need to find for fixing this world……"
The Wrench in his right hand swayed.
To fix a world, someone Shirin had identified needed to touch the Wrench directly three times.
"……They appear to be in there."
His gesture indicated the tallest tower rising from the center of Sister Fortress.

An alarm blared through the steel fortress.
Who could have imagined it. The sisters who had challenged humanity to battle and won victory after victory in a sweeping advance — that their headquarters, Sister Fortress, could face a crisis.
"An intruder!"
Among the countless sister operators who filled the command room, the voice of one — a braided sister whose best subject was science but who was secretly also good at sports — rang out through the command room.
"Someone entered through the gate and is approaching, making sisters cry one after another!"

"Impossible! How did they break through the gate secretary!?"
The commander's voice rose in astonishment. She probably meant "security," but.
"I don't know!"
The operator cried out.
"They must be something formidable, it appears."
The voice of the Sister King nodding behind her retained its dignity and composure.
Though she might simply not have understood the situation.
At that moment.
Ding-dong sounded a chime.
"Yes."
One operator sitting near the commander routed the call to her desk and put it on audio,
『Hi, I'm home. Open the door?』
Through the speaker, a girl's voice with a vaguely acted quality.
However, the operator — a class-president type but with a slightly clumsy side — didn't notice the unnaturalness.
The communication origin was the command tower entrance. It was always locked, requiring palm print, voiceprint, PIN number, and card key to enter.
"Hm? What about your key?"
『I dropped it.』
It happened all the time. Sisters, after all.
"Honestly. Fine."
Murmuring with a wry smile, the operator disengaged the lock on the entrance.
『It opened. Thank you.』
"Next time, be careful not to drop your key."
『Okay.』
Having heard the acknowledgment, the operator closed the line and went back to the data-checking work she'd been doing before.
Shortly after.
In the stream of information flowing and vanishing endlessly, she found something glaringly unnatural.
There was only one thing this could mean.
"Emergency!"
She turned to the commander and raised her voice.
"What is it now!?"
"Someone has entered this tower! Sister signature — undetected! It's an enemy!"
"Impossible! How did they get in?"
"I don't know!"
Apparently they didn't know.

"Where are they!?"
The operator ran her eyes over the data and shouted,
"Heading for this command room――!"
The door opened.
Behind Sister King.
Silence.
A stillness like the surface of an unruffled lake filled the command room for an instant.
The silence was broken by one of the two intruders — the woman with a cute squirrel on her shoulder.
"……What are you doing here, Kashimura……?"
The intruder — Mine — saw the mascot pet beside Sister King Ria, and spoke.

Having bluffed their way through the fortress gate and main entrance with Chisa's voice impression and fast talking, and following Shirin's directions toward the target person――
Why did the people of this world keep losing until now……
Mine couldn't help wondering.
They'd taken the elevator to the top floor, opened the door in front of them.
There was a very large room.
Lots of desks, and at each desk a computer and a girl.
Of course, being here, they were all sisters.
And among them.
Just inside the open door, standing blankly near a girl in a too-big suit of armor, was a lone male figure.
Mine dropped her jaw open,
"……What are you doing here, Kashimura……?"
She couldn't help speaking to the classmate in his school uniform.
Not particularly tall or short among the boys in class. Hair that made it hard to tell if it was a style or just bedhead. Eyes that glittered uselessly like a mischievous child's.
Above all, wearing exactly the same school uniform he'd had on when he disappeared.
There was no chance of mistaking him. Mine's classmate, Kashimura Kou.
"Huh? Sonezaki? Why are you in a place like this?"
Kashimura let out a surprised voice on seeing Mine, but,
"I could say the same to you! Everyone was worried, and I came all this way to look for you!
What are you doing in a place like this when everyone is worried about you!?"
Pressed by Mine's vehemence, Kashimura made a troubled face,
"W-well, I ended up in this totally incomprehensible place, and I was wandering around, and……"

"I found him!"
A sudden shout came from the girl in the too-big armor standing next to Kashimura.
Mine looked over,
"……Um……who might you be……?"
"Sister King!"
Sister King?
Mine's brow furrowed. Which meant this apparently-five-year-old was the——
"……Ria-chan?"
"Exactly!"
"——You! Don't call Sister King by her name so familiarly!"
Somewhere behind Ria, a girl in military costume with a strong-willed look and twin tails raised her voice — but, well, leaving that aside.
"Found, you said……"
"Yeah. This kid was lost on her tricycle, so I gave her some chocolate I had and showed her the way here. But she's gotten attached to me and won't let go."
Kashimura grinned his sloppy grin as he filled in the explanation.
"Wasn't lost! Was looking! Ria found him!"
Ria raised her voice in protest, face flushed red.
"Oh. Sorry, sorry. You're right."
Kashimura hurriedly crouched down and gently patted Ria on the head.
Watching that, Mine felt a complicated feeling rising in her chest.
The world was currently under threat from sisters.
But looking at this scene — by any account, Kashimura was the one who looked like some kind of criminal.
For just a moment she was tempted to leave everything as it was and go home — but somehow she pushed the thought away,
"Anyway, Kashimura, let's go home.
Ria-chan, the big brother needs to go back because his family is worried."
At Mine's words, Ria planted her feet wide and stood in the way,
"Not giving him up!
If you absolutely insist — I might trade him for three bags of potato chips!"
"W-wait, come on,"
Kashimura's voice of protest was ignored by everyone, of course.
At Sister King's outrageous demand, Mine bit back a groan. Unfortunately, all she had on her right now was gum.
But she saw room for negotiation!
"Gum won't do?"
At the question, Sister King's eyes wavered.
"What flavor!"

"Mint."
The instant Mine answered.
Every trace of interest vanished from Sister King's expression.
"Too bad! Blueberry would have been fine!"
It seemed spearmint was not to her taste.
With negotiations broken down, what move to take next — as Mine was thinking seriously about it,
"Enough, Sis."
Chisa on her shoulder let out a tired voice.
The sisters around them started making a fuss about the squirrel talking — but Chisa ignored them,
"Take the classmate home. Touch the Wrench to the person Shirin-san found, three times.
That's all there is to it.
So, Shirin-san — who is that person?"
"Ah, yeah……it's Ria-chan."
Shirin's answer was more or less what Mine had vaguely expected.
That said.
Chisa wasn't wrong — but Mine had her own feelings about the idea of hitting a small child with a stick and calling it resolved.
Shirin apparently felt the same way, and the two of them exchanged troubled looks.
At the two of them, Chisa said with a sigh,
"Either way you have to do it.
Otherwise the world won't be fixed."
"Don't tell me you lot――!"
Sister King Ria reacted to those words.
Opening her already-large eyes even wider,
"Are you trying to put the world back to how it was before――!"
……
『Eh!?』
Mine and the others let out simultaneous sounds of surprise.
They had explained nothing about various worlds being mixed up together — it had seemed completely pointless to explain to a five-year-old.
And yet.
Ria had just spoken as if she understood the situation perfectly.
Mine and the others turned their eyes on her involuntarily, and Sister King met their gaze with a clear, steady look,
"When we were finally making a world for sisters!

Trying to put it back the way it was is absolutely not okay!"
Apparently she meant the situation in her own world.
At Sister King's words,
"——Y-yes!"
A bespectacled girl sitting at her desk raised her voice and stood up with a clatter,
"Wh-what do you think us sisters have been through until now — we won't let you interfere!"
"What about me!"
Another girl stood up and raised her voice,
"I was told to come change the TV channel because the remote couldn't be found!"
Using that as the opening, the sisters stood up one after another,
"I asked and asked and was never given any pudding!"
"I secretly borrowed my older sister's allowance meaning to pay it back, and got in huge trouble!"
"My birthday cake was a little too small!"
Each spoke their piece in turn, stating the hardships they'd suffered.
When everyone had had their say,
"……You all have it good……"
The one who groaned, as if from the depths of hell, was the girl in military uniform.
Casting a dark gaze somewhere, she said,
"As for me……
My big brother……told me to call him not 'nii-san' but 'hoh-nii-chan'……"
Hearing that, Chisa on Mine's shoulder said quietly, very quietly,
"……How awful……"
So that is awful. Mine thought inwardly without saying it.
As someone who was herself in the position of an older sister, she had various things she'd like to say.
Brothers and sisters, regardless of gender or birth order, could care deeply for each other while also finding each other irritating — that was probably just what family was.
"And so!"
Sister King Ria declared.
"We'll defeat all the bad big brothers and big sisters!
And make a world just for sisters!"
At the declaration, the sisters erupted in joy! Someone started a chant of "Hail Sisters!" and others joined in.
The chorus shook the air of the command room powerfully.
But at that moment.
"……But if there's no one above you, you're not a little sister anymore, are you."
Kashimura's murmur — up until now his presence had been essentially zero — made the

sister chant cut off abruptly.
In its place, the command room was filled by a deep silence like the bottom of the ocean.
Slowly.
Ria's body swayed.
"Oh, that's true!"
With a scream, Sister King Ria sank to her knees on the spot.
Now.
Sister King's heart broke.
Not just Ria's — the hearts and ambitions of every sister present.
Because they had all realized it.
The cold, pitiless reality: that if the ambition to destroy everything other than themselves — brothers and sisters — were carried out, they themselves would no longer be little sisters.
"Huh. They hadn't realized that."
Mine's dumbfounded murmur announced the end of the incident.

Ria, hands behind her back and squirming, peeked up for just a moment, glancing at the person standing before her — her sister Luka, female resistance fighter — then immediately looked down again.
Who could count how many times she'd done that already.
After the fierce battle at Sister Fortress — "fierce battle" in this case meaning that consoling the sisters who'd had their ambitions crushed and started crying was extremely exhausting.
Mine and the others had Ria touch the Wrench three times.
No clearly visible change occurred, but something in various worlds had again been fixed just a little, presumably.
Afterward, Ria had asked to be accompanied to go apologize to her big sister Luka, and they'd agreed.
Near the resistance's headquarters, in the middle of the ruined city.
Sister and older sister were reunited.
Ria glanced up again, and looked down again.
On Mine's shoulder, Chisa was moving her feet impatiently, tap-tap-tap — Mine was a little worried that Chisa might lose patience and shout something out.
"——Ria."
When Luka called her sister's name, Sister King — no, Ria — quivered with fright——
But immediately noticed.
That the voice calling her name was terribly, deeply gentle.
She slowly raised her face.
What received Ria's gaze was Luka's soft smile.

Instantly, large tears welled in Ria's eyes and spilled over.
"Shishter! I'm sorwy!"
Crying as she apologized, she threw herself into Luka's arms.
Luka gently embraced her sister, one hand stroking her head.
"It's alright, Ria. Because you said 'I'm sorry' properly."
——That's enough.
Mine watched the ruined city and felt something in her heart not quite settled.
But, well, it couldn't be helped.
For Luka, Ria was her little sister.

Midday sunlight came in through the window.
In the living room of Mine and Chisa's house. On the low table lay the open sketchbook, and the door on one of its pages was now tightly closed.
There sat the usual members — Mine and the others — plus one more, Kashimura.
Things in that other world had been resolved, and they'd come back — but she had no idea what to explain to Kashimura, who'd been dragged into it, or where to start.
Forgetting even to offer him a seat, everyone stood around, and Mine stood thinking for a while.
"……Uh……hey, Sonezaki."
It was Kashimura who spoke first.
In an unsettled voice, his gaze slightly averted from Mine,
"……Look, just in case you've got the wrong idea from any of this, I just wanted to say something……"
A glance at Mine, then looking away again,
"I'm into sisters, but it's not like I'm a lolicon or anything!"
"……That's beside the point……"
Mine's shoulders dropped.
"It is not beside the point! That's an important distinction!"
"So you're seriously into sisters."
At the point, Kashimura's face went red,
"S-so what!
But don't get confused — romantic feelings and sister feelings are separate! It's like what Oda Nobunaga said — 'sister feelings are a separate appetite'!"
"THAT QUOTE DOESN'T EXIST!"
The moment Mine retorted——
"W-wait, Sis!"
Chisa on her shoulder whispered urgently.
"You don't know that famous Nobunaga quote!? That's a little embarrassing!"
Apparently it was a thing.

What are you doing, Nobunaga.
Of course that, too, was a result of the world having gone wrong.
Somehow she felt drained, and all of this suddenly felt pointless to think about.
"Your preferences are your own business……
But Kashimura, I have a request."
Having decided to speak directly, Mine looked straight at Kashimura's face, and he averted his gaze,
"What is it……suddenly so formal."
"Our house being full of strange doors with connections to other places on the other side……if possible, I'd like you to keep that to yourself."
『Huh?』
The same bewildered voices came from Kashimura and, for some reason, Chisa on her shoulder.
Kashimura looked confused,
"Look……if you say keep quiet, I won't tell anyone……
But you learn in elementary school that Sonezaki's house has loads of doors connected to various worlds, right?"
……
"Huh?"
This time it was Mine.
At her ear, Chisa said worriedly,
"What's wrong with you, Sis? You're acting weird today."
Apparently you learn it.
"……Is that……like, in social studies class?"
She murmured in a daze. Kashimura looked away and said nothing, and instead Chisa whispered,
"What are you talking about. It's health and physical education, obviously. Boys and girls in separate rooms."
"WHAT!? A topic that would make a child of tender age blush!?"
Of course Mine, who remembered the original world — in other words, who only remembered the normal world — had no such memory.
She sort of wanted to know, sort of didn't, how exactly it was being taught.
Kashimura still looked away and said,
"……According to my dad, when they tried to put it in the textbook, there was apparently a lot of controversy. Other countries lodged official protests."
"An international incident!?
But, even so, that would mean some country somewhere is probably sending agents here to get the technology of doorways to other worlds, right?"
At Mine's confused question, he gave a wry smile,

"Sonezaki, that's just you reading too much manga."
"Oh. It's manga. I'm reading too much manga. It's me."
At this point all she could do was force a strained smile.
Mine had once had her sister Chisa turn into a tentacle, and after that she had thought nothing could rattle her.
But apparently she had been underestimating this gone-wrong world.
".....Ahh.....well.....whatever.....it doesn't matter."
She murmured, and felt suddenly completely exhausted. She shifted her gaze to the window.
In the garden of the next house, a robot had landed.
It was probably because the world had gotten just a little more fixed.
On TV it had been about twenty meters in total height — now it was about thirty centimeters.

Spring was already near.

"But why were they all little girls?"
After they'd sent Kashimura home.
At the words Mine let drop quietly, Chisa and Shirin opened their eyes wide.
"Didn't you find it strange?
That world where sister civilization had developed — there wasn't a single adult sister.
Older sisters count even when they grow up, if there's someone above them. So there should have been adult sisters, but there were only children."
She said it with a knowing air, and Chisa and Shirin looked at each other.
"You're the one who hadn't noticed, Sis?"
said Chisa.
"Hadn't noticed what?"
"Ahh. Right."
At the question, Shirin made a complicated face and looked at Chisa,
"Because of the worlds going wrong, in this world, like Chisa-chan, all the sisters have taken on a squirrel-like form."
"Yes."
"Don't say squirrel."
Shirin said with apparent difficulty,
"So.....in that world, all the sisters had turned into little girls."
.....
Mine turned those words over in her head for a while——

"……So……what you're saying is that the clingy little darlings were actually battle-hardened old ladies of a certain age, or crafty old foxes who've seen it all……?"
"Not all of them, necessarily.
Ria-chan is definitely younger than Luka-chan, so she's confirmed."
"……Hmm……"
Mine wasn't particularly crazy about small girls.
But somehow. That was very, very disagreeable.
"There are things you're better off not knowing."
On the table, Chisa was drinking green tea with a look of enlightenment.

Door 4:

For Whose Sake Do We Repair

The season of cherry blossoms.
The time of meetings and farewells.
『There is an important announcement for everyone.』
At the Monday morning all-school assembly, the vice principal stepped up to the microphone before the students lined up in the schoolyard and said that first of all.
『This year, due to the principal's circumstances, graduation, advancement to the next grade, and enrollment will be cancelled.』
"Whaat!?"
Only one voice of surprise went up from among the lined students.
Everyone's eyes gathered on that one person.
『What is the matter?』
Asked by the vice principal, the student who had spoken — Sonezaki Mine — finally understood the situation.
Due to the principal's circumstances, graduation and the rest would not be happening at all. This, too, was a normal thing.
"Ah. No. It's just that there was a bee flying right in front of me just now. I said it without thinking."
"……A bee!?" "No way!" "Here!?"
In her hurry, she blurted out a lie, and the word "bee" made the students around her erupt into noise.
Apparently, even in this world where all sorts of normals had gone wrong, bees being dangerous creatures hadn't changed — Mine felt a tiny bit of relief.
"A bee, are you serious!? I haven't heard any news about a defensive perimeter breach!"
"If that's true, what is the government even doing!?"
……Correction. It appeared bees were more dangerous than Mine realized.
"Ah. Um……I did see something, but it might have been a mistaken identification……"
When she hastily corrected herself, relieved exhales came from all around.

"……R……right……" "Don't scare us like that……" "Seriously it’s bad for the heart."
『Ah. Quiet, please.』
At the vice principal's voice, everyone fell silent.
『If it was a misidentification, there's nothing to be done. It's understandable to be nervous about bees. Now, to continue what I was saying――』
Listening to what followed.
――But if there's no grade advancement, the ages and grades won't match up, and it would feel a bit like being held back――
Mine spent the entire time thinking about that.

Mine's house had doors. More doors than anyone could want.
A little while back.
Mine had woken one morning to find the house where she lived with her sister Chisa covered with doors of all sizes — floor, walls, ceiling, inside the shelves — everywhere, packed without a gap.
Up until the day before, the house where the two sisters lived had been a bit old but perfectly ordinary.
Not just the house — all sorts of things in the world had gone strange: her sister Chisa was a squirrel, pork belly from the supermarket had sprouts growing all over it, and if you scratched a newly built building with your fingernail, it smelled like bananas.
Yet Chisa and everyone else thought that was normal. Only Mine alone remembered what the original world had been like.
While she was struggling with this, a man who called himself Shirin came along and explained that various worlds had been mixed together, causing the world to go strange.
One thing led to another, and Mine and Chisa ended up going around with Shirin, fixing the various worlds that had gone strange — accessible through doors that appeared where they had no business being.
She understood that all sorts of things about the current world were wrong, but she didn't know specifically what had changed in what way.
Which meant she sometimes made mistakes like the one today.
"I didn't know what to do today. You suddenly came out with something like that, Sis."
On the way home from school. Chisa — the four-tailed squirrel, fifteen centimeters long, sitting on Mine's shoulder — said this in a small voice.
Of course it was about the morning assembly.
"It's just impossible for graduation not to happen due to the principal's circumstances, right? I don't know what kind of circumstances would lead to that, it makes no sense, and your age and grade end up not matching."
As Mine complained, Chisa patted her on the head lightly in a soothing way, and said, "But look. Even Nobita and Katsuo don't advance grades every year — due to the

principal's circumstances, right? It's the same thing."
"What!? That's due to the principal's circumstances!?
No! That plot doesn't exist at all! Not a single such episode!"
Mine looked at her and flapped her hands, and Chisa tilted her head with a wondering look,
"Does that mean — in the normal world Sis knows — Nobita and Katsuo grow up and become adults!?"
"……Well……they don't grow up……"
"Huh? Not growing up for no reason is way more unnatural. 'Due to the principal's circumstances' is way more logical."
"……Is it……?"
Mine tilted her head slightly.
"Well, I know Sis's normal and the current normal are different, and I understand you'd be surprised sometimes — but——"
Chisa shifted her tone, lowered her voice,
"——but suddenly saying 'bee' of all things was really bad, no matter how you look at it."
"I wanted to ask about that, too.
What exactly are bees like?
The bees in my version of normal weren't something anyone would panic about to that extent."
At the question, Chisa opened her eyes wide in surprise,
"You mean in the 'normal' Sis remembers, bees are actually safe creatures?"
As the two of them talked on their way home, a truck with countless eyes packed all over a container drove past, blinking rapidly at the dust it was raising itself.
"Not exactly safe. They sting people."
"Beams?"
"Beams!? No. They don't shoot those. Bees don't shoot beams."
At the answer, Chisa thought it over.
"Hmm. That's pretty mild.
Probably because the world went wrong, but normal bees shoot beams.
More than that! Those things also shoot royal jelly!"
"Royal jelly is a threat?" It sounded like it might make your skin glow.
"Anyway, be careful with what you say.
Even as a joke or a lie, don't say a bee showed up."
"I do want to be careful, but where or how should I——"
Vwooooooooo……
At that moment.
Cutting off her words, an unpleasant sound rang out and echoed.
Mine stopped walking involuntarily.

One side of the road was open, and from there the whole town could be seen at a glance.
From the town spread below, buildings large and small, advertising balloons, and string-like things whose purpose was unknown stretched up and up into the sky.
For Mine lately it was a familiar sight — the ordinary thing being not-ordinary.
She understood that the sound blanketing all of it was a siren announcing that something not ordinary was happening.
Without her noticing.
Chisa on her shoulder was clinging to Mine's hair, shaking in small, rapid trembles.
"What is this, Chisa?"
"……Bees……"
In the midst of the blaring siren.
"Bees appeared……"
Chisa's small murmur came through clearly, for some reason.

They rushed inside the house and went straight to the room with the TV.
First, understanding the situation was critical. Fleeing without knowing could mean running straight into danger without realizing it.
She turned on the TV before the lights. The screen's surface swelled and deformed, lights from all four sides of the room hit it with light and color, and a shape rose into view.
What appeared at last was——
A golfer sinking a putt on brilliant green turf! The crowd's applause swirling up!
"……It's so peaceful."
Mine murmured flatly. Chisa on her shoulder went, ah, and realized something,
"That's the wrong channel, Sis! That station keeps airing its regular programming even during emergencies!"
"That station!? That part is the same!?"
As she spoke, Mine's hand used the remote to change the channel.
What appeared was a news studio. With phones ringing behind him, a pale-faced anchor said,
『……is moving in that direction. Here again is the footage from the scene.』
The screen cut, and what appeared was a column of tanks.
From the turrets of the tank formation came thin orange lines of fire with a thunderous roar, tracing gentle arcs that converged on a single point in the distance.
At the point where the shells converged — it was there.
Its body marked with the warning colors of yellow and black, the size of a modest building. Despite what should have been direct hits from multiple tank shells, it didn't appear to have taken any significant damage.

Its form resembled nothing Mine had ever seen before.
A scrolling chyron at the top of the screen showed its current location.
"……What is this monster movie……?"
"It's a bee."
Said Chisa.
"No, no. The bees I know are much more――"
"Whatever the bees Sis knows are like, right now, a normal bee is like that.
Though it doesn't look like it's coming this way, at least."
There was relief in Chisa's voice. Without her noticing, the sirens that had been blaring outside had also gone quiet.
Yet the monster movie on the screen was a reality happening somewhere.
For an instant, a flash of light crossed the screen. The light the "bee" had fired struck somewhere distant in the ground.
『Ah! A bee beam! A bee beam has just been fired!』
The anchor's voice went high with excitement.
Mine had no energy left to retort at the unimaginative naming.
『We cannot confirm from the footage, but what is the extent of the damage!?』
"……What is this……?"
Mine's murmured voice was hoarse.
"It's okay, Sis. It won't come around here."
She knew Chisa meant it as comfort, but the rough feeling that had formed in Mine's heart wouldn't go away.
The world had gone strange and all sorts of strange things had happened up until now.
But. This. This kind of thing was out. Not acceptable.
Standing without even sitting in a chair, both sisters staring at the screen, from behind them came the sound of a door opening with a clunk.
"Hey. Came to check in."
No need to look to know who it was.
The young man who had been going around with Mine and the others fixing various worlds — Shirin.
The arrangement was to make contact once a day, and that was presumably why he'd shown up, but.
With neither of the two responding, Shirin looked at the TV screen,
"Hello? Why are you two watching a monster movie so intently?"
Monster movie.
Mine herself had thought the same thing at first. It was understandable that Shirin, not knowing the situation, would feel the same.
But now that she knew the situation, the casual way of saying it grated on her.
Mine involuntarily turned to face Shirin — the complaint on the tip of her tongue was

barely kept in, but her displeasure had apparently shown on her face.
"……Hm? What? Mine-chan?"
The silver-haired young man drew back slightly, taken aback.
In autumn through winter he had worn a black coat, but now he was in a lighter jacket. Though the color was still black.
In his right hand, the long staff called the Wrench.
When they went to other worlds, whoever Shirin identified had to touch the Wrench three times directly. That was the way to return the world to normal.
"——Right."
Mine murmured.
She looked at the TV. Looked at Shirin. Then at Chisa.
"Chisa. Let's do something about that bee."
"Huh?"
At Mine's call, Chisa turned with a frown from her spot on the table.
"What do you mean 'do something'? How?"
Of course Mine couldn't command an army to defeat the bee, or transform and fight it in a robot.
But.
"Fix the world."
That, she could do.
"If bees return to normal, this won't happen either."
"That makes sense."
Chisa agreed.
Of course, fixing one or two worlds wouldn't necessarily make bees stop being giant monsters right away.
But if they kept it up, eventually something had to change.
"Let's go! To another world!"
"Yes!"
The excited sisters, side by side.
"……Um. What's a bee?"
Left behind, not knowing the situation, Shirin was being left out of the conversation.

Among the countless doors in the house — the ones that had no business being there. Pass through them and it was another world.
The group emerged in a room of a small vacant house.
"This is a strange place."
Riding Mine's shoulder, looking around the room, Chisa said.
"Well, it's another world."
As he answered, Shirin swung the tip of the Wrench in a circle then stopped it,

"I have a general idea which direction the target is. Let's head out first."
Down the dimly dusty hallway to a back door. They put on the shoes they'd brought and left the house.
Evening was approaching the town.
The sky hadn't yet lost its color, but early street lamps were beginning to light here and there.
Passersby on the street cast sidelong glances at the combination of Mine with a squirrel on her shoulder and Shirin with a long stick.
Store signs. Cars passing. A train running on distant tracks.
"Whoa!? What is that car!? Gross!"
"Chisa-chan. Don't be loud, you'll draw attention."
"What are you talking about. You're swinging that stick around, which is already attracting plenty of attention."
Chisa and Shirin talked as they walked through the evening town.
Mine looked around in silence.
Music played in the distant sky. It was probably urging children to come home. A melody she should be hearing for the first time made her feel a deep, painful nostalgia.
"Whoa, look at that traffic light, Sis! Color-coded lamps lighting and going out in sequence — that's unbelievable!
.....Sis, what's wrong?"
As expected of sisters. Chisa seemed to have noticed Mine's unusual state.
"Ah. Yeah....."
She debated whether to say it. She hesitated a moment, but staying quiet wasn't going to help.
Mine looked around at the world and opened her mouth.
"Here..... It looks just like the original world I know."
And so it was.
Square buildings stood in rows, rubber-tired automobiles moved along asphalt roads. Students in uniforms played at the edge of the sidewalk, vapor trails crossed the distant sky.
It was scenery Mine had once grown tired of looking at. A daily life she had thought only boring.
The beloved scene Mine now longed for desperately, that she still couldn't get back.
The "normal" Mine's world had lost — it existed in this different world.

Chisa doubted her own ears for a moment.
This world looks just like the original normal world?
Her older sister had certainly just said that.
This strange world?

She casually looked around again, comparing the "normal" she knew with the "normal" here in her head.
In the normal world, streetlights and utility poles branched and forked, sometimes making an abacus-game of branches to enjoy — but here they were charmlessly rigid single poles. Nothing interesting about them whatsoever.
The distant train had no feet, which made it look like some huge snake and was creepy.
Cars with neither legs nor tails somehow running — what was that? Ghosts? The work of ghosts?
On top of that, earlier, some gloomy music had been blared across the whole town — what curse was that?
From the signal light, instead of anything colored coming out, lamps just alternated on and off — unbelievable. Surely many people would carelessly overlook it.

Every building being square without exception gave off an obsessive, monomaniacal feel, and the thin elongated clouds stretching across the sky looked like nothing short of terminal atmospheric abnormality.
Overall, frankly speaking, very off-putting.
This is normal?
Her sister — no, were both of them — trying to change this familiar normal world into, or change it back to, this creepy and frightening thing?
She was about to complain — but in the end, said nothing.
Chisa understood, rationally. That her own memories and way of seeing things had also been changed by the fact of various worlds mixing together and going wrong.
So she understood that Mine's normal was the real one, and what she herself thought was normal was actually wrong.
She understood — but.
Rational understanding and the heart's acceptance were two different things.
Carrying that unresolved feeling, Chisa simply sat quietly, quietly still on Mine's shoulder.

Walking through the twilit town. Inside Mine's chest, doubt grew bit by bit.
An unfamiliar world that was ordinary and familiar.
Of course it wasn't identical in every single way. The fashion sense of passersby was a little different, and among the signs of the stores and products around them were quite a few names she didn't recognize.
But inversely, those were about the only notable differences.
Everything else was so ordinary it was almost enough to bring tears.
If she let her guard down, she could almost convince herself that the only thing that was off was her own memory and the squirrel and the person with the staff, and the world

hadn't gone strange at all.
This ordinary scene.
Mine and the others were about to destroy it.
They would touch the person Shirin had found to the Wrench three times, and fix the world just a little.
That also meant eliminating the normal that currently existed here.
Even if the world changed, the people living here probably wouldn't feel anything.
When the world changed, their perceptions would change, their memories would change, they wouldn't even notice something had shifted, and they would carry on with days no different from before.
There seemed to be people like Mine who remembered the original normal, and people like Chisa who could vaguely sense changes, but those were an extremely small minority of exceptions.
Even so,the fact remained that Mine and the others were changing the normal of this world — no, fixing one had ripple effects through all the mixed-up worlds, so they were changing the normal of many worlds.
——That doesn't mean it's acceptable to leave it as it is——
Trying somehow to rouse her wavering heart, Mine armored herself with reasoning inside.
She still thought fixing the world was something that had to be done. Because, well, her mother and her teachers always said: after you've made a mess, put it properly back the way it was.
First and foremost, something had to be done about the bees.
Moving her feet forward, thinking through various things like that, when——
"——Getting closer."
Noticing a shadow in Shirin's voice, Mine brought her mind back to the present.
Shirin swayed the tip of the Wrench back and forth with a serious face,
"But……this is a problem.
Moving fast. Probably in some kind of vehicle. It'll be here soon."
Saying that, he sent his gaze down the road ahead.
It was still early for the evening rush. Traffic wasn't heavy.
"There. That black car."
Once he said it, she saw it immediately. One large, black car of the kind often seen in TV and movies transporting important people.
With no time to consult, the car came down the road, passed just beside them.
As it passed, she could see inside. Four people in black suits, and sitting in the middle of the back seat, a girl who looked a little younger than Mine, gagged, limp and unconscious.
……

.....
『She's been kidnapped!』
"W-what do we do, Sis!"
"What do we do, Mine-chan!?"
Why were both of them depending on her? She had thoughts about that, but now was not the time to voice them. While they stood here, the car was getting further and further away.
What to do — a development like out of a drama——
Something flashed in Mine's head as she thought that!
Namely! A drama-like development called for a drama-like response!
.....Of course whether that was actually the right answer was a little questionable, but she couldn't think of anything else, so nothing to be done.
Anyway, Mine raised her right hand high.
A taxi passed in conveniently drama-like timing, stopped beside her, and opened its door.
She got in without hesitation and said, "Driver, please follow the black car ahead. Without being noticed!" Which was also conveniently drama-like.
Meanwhile, for some reason Shirin was still outside the car, flustered.
".....M-Mine-chan.....?"
"Get in quickly!" With a single command, he finally, groaning something vague like "ah" and "ugh," and somehow he crammed the Wrench into the car and got in.
.....The Wrench seemed to bend in an unnatural way, bworp — but setting that aside.
The door closed and the taxi started moving.
"This is a bit like a detective drama, isn't it," the driver said lightly, and Mine nodded in the rearview mirror,
"A girl was being abducted. I'm sorry, but could you please contact the police?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha."
"No, really."
"....."
The black car ahead turned left at the next street.
".....Hm?"
The driver's voice went stiff.
".....Really.....?"
"Really."
Mine nodded again with a serious expression.
"——This is unit two-five-seven HQ, come in, this is unit two-five-seven HQ, come in!"
As the driver frantically started shouting into the radio, from behind him,
".....But Mine-chan, what about the fare for this vehicle?"

Asked by Shirin in a low voice, Mine thought briefly,
"Now that you mention it, I did sort of get in on impulse, but I think we'll figure it out somehow. Worst case, we go home for a m—— ah."
She remembered at that point. That this was not their own world.
The atmosphere around them resembled the pre-strange world so closely that she'd inadvertently gotten into the taxi with the same mindset she would at home — but their world's money probably wouldn't work here.
"And also, Sis, following is fine, but what do we do after?"
Chisa on her shoulder asked.
"Even if the police come and are able to rescue that girl, we obviously can't hit her with a stick in front of officers. They'll probably ask our names and addresses too."
Asked from the left and from the right shoulder both, Mine said quietly,
"Th……there's nothing I can say…… It's not like we could have just let it go past.
And don't put it all on me — you two think of something too."
Turned back on them, Shirin and Chisa looked at each other across Mine's head,
"You could just charge the fare to the police, right?"
"That's nice, Chisa-chan! Then there's just the question of the moment of truth……"
And for some reason Shirin glanced at Mine,
"If things get complicated, it's Mine-chan's turn."
"Me!? Why!?"
At the sudden unreasonable demand,
"What are you talking about,"
came from Chisa on the right,
"Sis defeated a demon king before, didn't she? Same idea."
"I did, but! That was just lucky timing or the opponent was an amateur!"
"……'Amateur,' Mine-chan……"
Shirin muttered something, but.
"Anyway, impossible, impossible! Even if you tell me to handle it somehow!
If the police rescue that girl, I think the best plan is to go back for now and come out again in a few days……"
"But then we can't fix this world today."
Chisa said.
"That would be the outcome then……so someone think of a better idea."
While they were whispering back and forth,
"Passengers!"
The driver, whose existence they'd nearly forgotten, suddenly called, and everyone looked forward at once.
"That's the car……right?"
They couldn't have driven that far, but the car had left the residential area and entered

a stretch with factory-like buildings.
Down that straight road ahead, a rust-spotted gate was slightly ajar at a deserted warehouse. In front of the gate sat a single black car.
It was probably the car from before, but there didn't seem to be anyone in it now.
The driver stopped at a distance.
Mine and the others looked at each other——
"Have you been in contact with the police?"
Shirin asked, and the driver turned partway around,
"Yes. I told HQ, so they should be contacting them."
At the answer, Shirin nodded deeply,
"We'll go have a look. Driver, stay here and wait for the police. Charge the fare to them."
He might be told to pay now, but whether from agitation or good nature,
"Please be careful."
The driver obligingly opened the door.
They got out of the car and approached. The black car was empty, and through the slightly open gate, in the extensive grounds, rust-stained containers were piled here and there, and several warehouses with their shutters closed stood in a row.
The company name on the warehouses was half-fallen away, and there was no sign of people having worked there for a long time.
It seemed certain that all the black-car people had gone in here.
Someone's throat made a small clicking sound.
"……Let's go."
Shirin declared, slipped through the gap in the gate. Mine followed with Chisa on her shoulder.
Ears alert, footsteps silent, slowly deeper and deeper into the grounds.
The noise from surrounding factories echoed strangely far away.
The smell of oil soaked into something drifted faintly on the wind.
While checking the atmosphere around them, peeking into container shadows — repeating this several times, just as they were about to circle around to the back of a warehouse,
"——You've come a long way! Nanzenji!" A woman's voice suddenly rang out. Mine and the others froze for an instant — then immediately recognized it hadn't been directed at them.
Peeking carefully from behind cover in the direction of the voice, they saw: among a cluster of stacked containers, a man and a group in black, facing each other.
One girl, gagged and unconscious, lay on the ground. Around her, four people in black suits — the ones who'd been in the car before.
All four in black suits wore sunglasses. Mine hadn't noticed before, but the one at the front doing the talking was a woman.

"You've given us endless grief, but that ends today."
The gaze of the black-suited group was fixed on a man in a beige jacket.
Mid-twenties or so, perhaps. Black hair, a capable-looking face — now deeply shadowed by obvious urgency.
"Let Miyoko go!"
The man called Nanzenji shouted, but the black suits only sneered.
It seemed that the black-suited group who had it in for this man named Nanzenji had kidnapped someone close to him to use as a hostage.
"Whether we let her go depends on your behavior, Nanzenji!
First……let's see. Hand over your gun."
"……Damn……"
Nanzenji hesitated for a brief moment, then drew a handgun from under his jacket and tossed it toward the woman's feet.
"Good. Nice and cooperative."
The woman kicked the gun that had rolled to her feet backward,
"It looks like you've made your peace. Then let's offer some thanks for all the grief.
Boys, do it."
She gave instruction to the men around her.
"But Boss, wouldn't a shot with that gun be quicker?"
At a suggestion from one of the men, the woman said in an exasperated voice,
"Don't be stupid. It makes noise. Besides, are you satisfied ending it in one shot?"
"——Fair point. Then let's offer thanks at length."
The three men fanned out to the sides and slowly began walking toward Nanzenji. The woman stepped a few paces forward and stood observing with arms leisurely crossed.
——Now!
Mine gave Chisa and Shirin rapid instructions and began moving before they could respond. Shirin reluctantly followed.
They quietly circled around behind the black-suited group and approached with soundless steps.
From Nanzenji's position, their movements should have been fully visible — but apparently sensing they were allies, he skillfully kept his expression neutral.
Shirin — slowly reached out — scooped up the unconscious girl.
With that much movement right behind her, even the woman in black noticed.
Whether she sensed a presence or heard some sound, the woman turned around——
And Mine's face was right in front of hers.
"Wh——!?"
The flustered woman tried to jump back, and Chisa leapt from the top of Mine's head onto the woman's face, clinging there.
"What is this!?"

Vision obscured, the woman's voice rose in confusion. At her voice, the three men who'd gone ahead also stopped and turned.

Mine immediately snatched up the fallen gun——

"Nanzenji-san!"

She called out and threw it!

The black mass of metal, bathed in the near-evening sun, traced an arc through the air and landed in Nanzenji's hand.

Simultaneously, Chisa kicked off the woman's face and landed on Mine's right shoulder.

"Don't move!" Nanzenji's voice, with gun raised, froze the men in place.

The girl was under Shirin's protection. The tables had turned!

The moment she saw the reversal, the woman in black alone spun on her heel and ran into the shadow of a container!

Mine watched her go, then let out a small breath and turned to Shirin, who was holding the girl,

"Now. While we can."

They had to fix the world before anything else.

She couldn't honestly say there was no hesitation about changing this world that looked normal to her — but.

"Okay."

Shirin raised the Wrench lightly in his right hand and directed it toward the girl's head——

The motion stopped.

"No——!"

Shirin raised his face in dismay,

"Not this one! The target is the woman who just ran!"

"That one!?"

She looked quickly — already blocked by containers, the woman was out of sight, but——

"We still have time! Let's chase her!"

"G-got it!"

Shirin's reply was still sounding as Mine had already broken into a sprint.

Rounding several stacks of containers, she could see the woman's fleeing back.

She wasn't heading for the main gate where the car was parked — she was heading for the chain-link fence enclosing the grounds. The woman jumped onto it and began to climb.

At this rate they might not catch up. If the woman climbed over and disappeared into the factory district, it would be difficult to follow.

Which meant——

"Shirin-san! The Wrench!"

Mine ran while looking back, reaching out her hand.
Shirin, half by reflex, passed the Wrench to Mine baton-style.
Mine took it, then, in a javelin-throw motion, aimed at the woman climbing the chain-link fence——
"Go!"
"Wait, Mine-ch——"
She threw.
Making a high-pitched slicing sound almost like a cry, the Wrench drove through the air——
Gonk.
It struck the woman directly on the head.
A small "ugh" went up, and the woman and the Wrench tumbled inside the fence with a thump.
"Mine-chan! Don't abuse the Wrench!"
"Sorry!"
She apologized casually to Shirin complaining behind her, without slowing her run.
Moving closer to look.
Whether it was a good spot to be hit or a bad one, the woman was completely out cold.
Mine picked up the Wrench from where it had fallen nearby, and lightly — kon — tapped the woman's head.
That made two contacts.
She raised the Wrench again——
A distant whistle sounded.
Mine's movement stopped dead.
Before she'd noticed, evening had fallen all around. Bathed in orange. The noise of the factory district was absorbed into the madder sky.

Once more.
Touch the Wrench to this woman, and the world would be fixed just a little.
This scene of the other world — nostalgic to Mine — would change to something else.
Returning the world to normal was something that had to be done.
But she couldn't help feeling that she didn't want to, with her own hands, destroy this ordinary scene——
"——Sis——"
How long had she been like that? Chisa's voice from her shoulder finally brought Mine back to herself.
Looking over, she found Chisa's worried eyes.
"Shall I do it?"
That single sentence made up her mind.

She smiled wryly, slowly shook her head left and right,
"No. I think this is probably something I have to do." She said.
And so, Mine brought the Wrench down.

When the police squad arrived at the scene.
The incident was completely over.
At the scene, the detective Nanzenji had pinned down the black-suited men, and the kidnapped relative had been safely rescued.
The female suspect who had appeared to have fled was also found nearby, unconscious.
Only.
The strangely dressed man and women who had cooperated with Nanzenji had vanished.

The crimson of the sunset was before long replaced by the indigo of early night.
Mine walked without a word down the road lined with lit streetlamps.
They had used a taxi from the vacant house where they'd arrived to the incident scene, but taking one back wasn't an option. It was a bit of a long walk, but it was the only way.
"Sis." Chisa — whose tail count had returned to three thanks to the world being fixed a little — called from Mine's right shoulder.
"Are you okay?"
"……Hmm? Why?"
She tried to feign composure. Had it worked?
"You look like you're down."
"It's nothing.
The world I want to fix is the original world where we live. So even if this world's appearance changes, it's one step toward various worlds getting better.
There's no reason to be down."
"You sure?"
Chisa looked around.
Honestly speaking, Mine was a little bit down, of course.
Mine had, with her own hands, made the Wrench touch the woman three times.
The world had been fixed just a little.
Chisa's tails had gone back to three.
And every building around them, without exception, had become yellow, wriggly objects of some kind.
After all, with her own hands, she had filled the world with yellow wriggly things.
She was dejected. Normally you'd be dejected.
All the more so when the state before had resembled the scene she knew so well.
But she couldn't afford to stay dejected.

Similar things might happen again from here on.
And she remembered there was something she needed to check.
"Come to think of it, Chisa — what's happening with the bees in our world? The same as before?"
Originally they'd gone out wanting to do something about that as soon as possible. Chisa should be able to tell what had changed and what hadn't.
But at the question, Chisa shook her head left and right.
"My tails went back to three, and all sorts of other things in the world changed, but — the bees alone are the same."
"……I see……"
Mine's voice naturally sank.
At that exchange, Shirin interjected from the side,
"You were saying something about bees when we left, but what happened?"
Come to think of it, she'd forgotten to explain.
Mine said with a downcast expression,
"Mm……right now, in our world, bees have for some reason become like giant monsters……
Apparently they shoot beams or something."
"Beams!?"
From the way Shirin's voice went up an octave, it seemed bees in his world weren't like that.
"Beams……meaning……!"
"Right――"
Chisa said, eyes still downcast,
"That beam you get hit by, and your body tingles."
『Hold on.』
Mine and Shirin's voices harmonized.
"Wait, Chisa, 'body tingles'……could that……is that……all it does?"
"What do you mean 'all it does,' Sis!"
At Mine's casual phrasing, Chisa's gaze sharpened,
"That way of making it sound minor! Have you ever thought about how the victims feel!?
It's not just when the beam hits! For days and days before it heals……if you get in the bath it tingles even more!"
At Chisa's earnest protest, Mine was briefly at a loss for words.
She'd been distracted by the impressive size of the bee on TV and the flashiness of the beams — so the power of the bee beam was……
"In other words……like getting too sunburned at the beach?"
Chisa thought for a moment,
"No. It's not that bad."

"So it's not that bad."
Apparently it wasn't much.
Which also raised the question of why everyone was so frantic over something like that.
Seeing Mine's expression visibly deflate, Chisa apparently sensed the gravity of the situation wasn't getting through,
"I'll say it plain — beams aside, if you get hit by the royal jelly, it gets itchy all over your body!"
The voice explaining this trembled faintly, possibly from fear.
So in other words, it seemed.
The bees themselves had gone strange, but also everyone's reaction to bees had gone strange.
Simply put, it didn't seem like there was that much urgency to fix the world.
If she'd known that.
——Maybe she could have lingered a bit longer in the ordinary world of that other place——
Thinking that now, far too late.
Under a sky where stars were beginning to glitter — a sky that seemed unchanged regardless of everything — Mine made her way home through the streets now filled with yellow wriggly things illuminated by streetlights, and she looked just a little bit lonely.

Afterword

Long time no see. Or, nice to meet you.
I am the author, Kanzaka Hajime.
And so, here is the first volume of DOORS, which I've started writing for some reason.
These days, quite a few people read the afterword before the main text, so I thought it might be appropriate to explain here: 'This book is a story of such-and-such a kind'...
But how exactly to explain it, I'm not sure.
Just the other day, a friend called me and we had this kind of exchange……

Friend: "So, how have you been lately? Any books coming out?"
Author: "Yeah. Something I'm serializing in The Sneaker, among other things."
Friend: "Hmm. Didn't know about that. What kind of story?"
Author: "……Some kind of incomprehensible story."
Friend: "Come on. That's no explanation."
Author: "……It's very difficult to explain……or rather, when you try to explain it, it becomes even more incomprehensible……"
Friend: "What do you mean?"
Author: "Erm……it's a story where an excessively advanced sister civilization turns against humanity."
Friend: "……"
Author: "See. You didn't get it."
Friend: "Don't gloat."

Well. What can I do. That's just what kind of story it is.
If someone reads this part of the afterword before the main text, with absolutely no prior knowledge, and thinks: 'Oh great, it's a sister civilization revolt story. I can basically read the whole plot from that. Tch, spoilers in the afterword' — and furthermore turns out to be right — I don't think there are many such people……but if there are, please brag to your friends about it.
I won't guarantee what reaction you'll get, though.
Actually, when I first got the opportunity to do something at Sneaker, the plan initially

was for a somewhat more……ordinary story.
After various difficulties and deliberations, somehow it ended up like this.

Author: "I suddenly had an impulse to do some strange one-shot gag concept. A silly story, like a change of pace."
Editor: "I see. Could you write out something like a rough synopsis for me?"

――Rough synopsis submitted――

Editor: "I read it, but this story doesn't end in one installment, does it? How about we make it a serial?"
Author: "Then how about an irregular publication schedule in a weird pattern? Like, the first time it fills a hundred manuscript pages, but in the next issue it can't be found. The reader thinks maybe it wasn't included this time, looks carefully, and finds a few lines of story text labeled 'DOORS Episode X' in the author-notes section. Something like that. Or the previous installment was fifty pages, but this time there's only ten, and then you discover the next forty pages in a completely different section of the magazine."
Editor: "The author-notes section is a bit questionable, but I'll look into whether we can adjust the page count."

While having exchanges like that, before I knew it, the thing was running as a perfectly normal regular serial.
Such were the circumstances surrounding the birth of this story. Half of its composition is the author's carelessness. It is not scientifically measurable, so the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare will not certify it as a pharmaceutical product.
Therefore, naturally, my answer to all the various reader questions of: 'Is that a foreshadowed element?' 'Isn't so-and-so actually such-and-such?' 'What happens next in the story?' — is a single unified response:
'Who knows……?'
That's all.
Ah. If anyone just had a fleeting thought of 'is he taking readers lightly' — not in the least.
Because I give the same answer of 'who knows……?' when my editor asks me similar things.
See — fair to everyone.
Actually, at one earlier point:
Editor: "I need it for an illustration direction, but the description alone doesn't make clear what shape this object is……"
Author: "It's fine. I was writing it without knowing what shape it was myself. Or rather —

a challenge to the reader's imagination?"
That kind of supremely sincere exchange has also taken place.
One wonders about oneself as a human being. Really.
I have a feeling the total volume probably won't be that large, but after all, this is what kind of work it is.
In the Sneaker serial, it wouldn't be surprising if it suddenly ended with 'THE END' and no setup or context whatsoever, and there is also the possibility it could continue in the next issue with a shameless 'sorry, forget the previous one.'
……Would the editor-in-chief get angry……
Well, such is DOORS, but I would be grateful for your support.
Then, until the next afterword.

Afterword: End